"[Behind Howard's stories] lurks a dark poetry and the timeless truth of dreams."
—ROBERT BLOCH

ROBERT E. HOWARD

SWORD WOMAN

AND OTHER HISTORICAL ADVENTURES

FULLY ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN WATKISS

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Sword Woman and Other Historical Adventures

Sword Woman
and
Other Historical Adventures

Robert E. Howard

Fully illustrated by
John Watkiss

Ballantine Books Del Rey New York

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Mistress of Death
appears here for the first time

This book is dedicated to my deceased wife, Lorraine,
who I'm sure would have been pleased
that I finally got to illustrate a book by such a great writer.

—John Watkiss

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“Touch it not,” exclaimed Asmund
His mighty right hand held ready the stained sword
Cormac thundered his battle cry …
“They have crossed the Jordan!”
We fell to it, thrusting, slashing …
So I gave the horse the rein and rode at a reckless gallop

Artist's Foreword

Robert E. Howard's crowning glory in literature was Conan the Cimmerian. His epic tales written from a remote place in Texas were remarkable in character, landscape, and mood.

At the age of fourteen, I first came across his stories in paperback editions. At that time, as a young artist, I had been studying anatomy with regard to drawing the human figure. The exotic, mysterious, action-packed stories of the Conan saga were a perfect vehicle for inventive figure renditions and stagings.

At that time I could only dream about working on Howard's stories. Now I have realized that dream, illustrating *Sword Woman and Other Historical Adventures.*

I hope you enjoy Howard's work as much as I enjoyed illustrating it.

—John Watkiss
2010

Introduction

Historical fiction has been a part of our literary heritage for almost as long as we have possessed the written word, since some forgotten scribe in the court of Rameses XI put pen to papyrus to create the "Report of Wenamon." Over the centuries it became the province of skalds and poets; bards and playwrights plundered whole archives to find fodder for the ages, while historians and antiquarians used fictionalized history as a means of understanding long-vanished civilizations. Today, while its form and function as a genre has changed, the appeal of historical fiction remains undiminished. It is the literature of spectacle and pageantry; at its simplest it is pure entertainment wrapped in a veneer of respectability often denied to its close cousin, fantasy. In the hands of a master, however, historical fiction does more than entertain … it puts a distinctly human face on our collective past.

Robert E. Howard (1906–1936) was such a master. Though his professional career spanned but a little more than a decade, he wrote, by conservative estimate, some three million words of poetry and prose, much of it having an historical slant. Indeed, a love of times past ran deep in Howard's veins; a survey of his correspondence reveals that virtually every letter between 1923 and 1936 makes some mention of his interest in things historical – from the Celtic migrations to the lives of local gunfighters. With this in mind, it's relatively easy to make the case that even Howard's non-historical writings, his tales of Conan of Cimmeria or Kull of Atlantis, are at heart historical fiction. Who can read *Black Colossus*, for instance, and not see the shadow of the Kingdom of Jerusalem in the plight of the tiny city-state of Khoraja? Does not the blood-feud in *Red Nails* echo the equally bloody Lincoln County War? Such parallels abound in Howard's fiction – some tenuous, others flare-bright and obvious.

The stories collected in this volume, however, are solidly historical. They owe their genesis to Howard's literary patron and *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright, who solicited the young Texan in the summer of 1930 to contribute to his newest pulp magazine, *Oriental Stories*: "I especially want historical tales," Wright's letter stated, "tales of the Crusades, of

Genghis Khan, of Tamerlane, and the wars between Islam and Hindooism." This was a welcome opportunity for Howard, and he seems to have wasted little time in acting upon it.

"There is no literary work, to me, half as zestful as rewriting history in the guise of fiction," he commented in a letter to H. P. Lovecraft. And indeed, Howard's zest, his passion, is evident in every detail and turn of phrase. These stories rank among REH's finest – lean and descriptive, with headlong plots and a rogues' gallery of characters who embody the kind of grim fatalism that has become a hallmark of his work. They span the breadth of the Middle Ages – from war-torn eleventh-century Ireland (*Spears of Clontarf*) to sixteenth-century Ottoman Crimea (*The Road of the Eagles*) – and they explore a similar theme, what Howard called his "continual search for newer barbarians, from age to age." The violent clash of civilizations and its tragic consequences fascinated Howard, as did the stoic heroism that arises in the face of inescapable doom. These themes crop up often in REH's oeuvre, in the travels of Solomon Kane, in the knife's-edge maneuverings of Francis Xavier Gordon, and in the determined resistance of Bran Mak Morn. But here, in his stories of Outremer and the Old Orient, Howard most eloquently questions the dominance of barbarism over civilization – a question he would ultimately answer in 1934, in the final paragraph of one of his most celebrated tales, *Beyond the Black River*:

> Barbarism is the natural state of mankind … civilization is unnatural. It is a whim of circumstance. And barbarism must always ultimately triumph.

Though passionate about his material and confident in his ability to spin a yarn, Howard nonetheless felt that the writing of historicals exposed one of his great faults to the world: "My knowledge of the Orient is extremely sketchy, and I have to draw on my imagination to supply missing links which I can't learn in the scanty references at my command." And though he seems to have considered the introduction of imagination into historical fiction to be a weakness, it is that selfsame imagination that gives these stories such a dramatic flair. Howard's prose has the power to bring history to life – grim and vicious life, but life all the same; he had a poet's eye for evoking sensations that surely must have existed, even if no mention is

made of them in the historical narrative – from the color of the night sky over a sacked and burning citadel to the taste of blood and gunpowder to the bitter stink of death that hangs in the morning air. When woven into the skein of history, these dollops of imagination elevate the rote recitation of dates and deeds into a potent form of art.

Howard bolstered his imagination by reading, widely and voraciously – no mean feat in Depression-era rural Texas. In his ongoing correspondence with fellow *Weird Tales* author H. P. Lovecraft, Howard lamented the dearth of culture in West Texas, stating that "… it is almost impossible to obtain books on obscure and esoteric subjects anywhere in the state." Despite the difficulties, Howard amassed a vast store of historical knowledge, both for the American Southwest and for lands far-flung. He counted Sir Walter Scott among his favorite authors, along with Talbot Mundy, Stanley Lane-Poole, and the much-esteemed Harold Lamb. And from every one, both fiction and nonfiction, he took away something with which to inform his own work.

Absent first-hand experiences garnered through travel, or the where-withal to perform one's own research *in situ*, cannibalizing and absorbing the works of others is a time-honored tradition among writers. Every book, story, and article one reads has the potential to supply a phrase or fact, a description or a bit of color. Of course, we should not confuse this with plagiarism; a good author – and Howard was one of the best – takes only inspiration, recasting the actual words to suit his own voice, his own style. *Gates of Empire*, included in this volume, boasts a perfect example of this tradition.

The scene is thus: in twelfth-century Cairo, emissaries of the Crusader King Amalric of Jerusalem, accompanied by that Falstaffian rogue, Giles Hobson – perhaps the most unique protagonist Howard ever created – have been granted an audience with the reclusive Fatimid Caliph of Egypt. Their escort is the wily vizier, Shawar …

> At the gates of the Great East Palace the ambassadors gave up their swords, and followed the vizier through dim tapestry-hung corridors and gold arched doors where tongueless Sudanese stood like images of black silence, sword in hand. They crossed an open court bordered by fretted arcades supported by marble columns; their ironclad feet rang on mosaic paving. Fountains

> jetted their silver sheen into the air, peacocks spread their iridescent plumage, parrots fluttered on golden threads. In broad halls jewels glittered for eyes of birds wrought of silver or gold. So they came at last to the vast audience room, with its ceiling of carved ebony and ivory. Courtiers in silks and jewels knelt facing a broad curtain heavy with gold and sewn with pearls that gleamed against its satin darkness like stars in a midnight sky.

While *The Arabian Nights* could easily have inspired Howard's sumptuous vision in the above passage, it is in fact rigorously historical – the details recorded at Amalric's behest by his friend and confessor, Archbishop Guillaume de Tyr, in his Latin history of the Kingdom of Jerusalem, *Historia Rerum in Partibus Transmarinis Gestarum (A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea)*. The *Historia* was rare in the 1930s – a modern English translation did not come out until 1943 – and only slightly less rare today. So where did Howard encounter it? In answer, we need only turn to the works of two of REH's favorite writers: Harold Lamb and Stanley Lane-Poole. Both men read Latin and traveled to the lands they wrote about. Lamb, an American adventure writer, split his time between fiction and non-fiction; Lane-Poole, a British archaeologist and Orientalist, wrote non-fiction histories with a storyteller's eye. Both men wrote extensively on the Crusades. In their books, Howard no doubt found limitless inspiration.

Weigh the passage from *Gates of Empire* against this, Lamb's version of the Caliph's opulent palace, from *The Crusades: the Flame of Islam*:

> The Fatimid kalif lived in guarded seclusion. Sudani swordsmen filled the corridors of the Great Palace, and paced the mosaic floors of the antechambers, by the marble fountains where peacocks strutted and parrots screamed. The audience hall glistened like a gigantic treasure vault with its ceiling of carved wood inlaid with gold, and its inanimate birds fashioned of silver and enamel feathers and ruby eyes. But the kalif was hidden from the eyes of the curious by a double curtain of gilt leather.

Now, place both against an excerpt from Stanley Lane-Poole's *Saladin and the Fall of the Kingdom of Jerusalem*, which incorporates both the colorful

description of the palace and the mission of the ambassadors – much of it in the words of Guillaume de Tyr, himself:

> The introduction of Christian ambassadors to the sacred presence, where few even of the most exalted Moslems were admitted, was unprecedented; but Amalric was in a position to dictate his own terms. Permission was granted, and Hugh of Cæsarea with Geoffrey Fulcher the Templar were selected for the unique embassy. The vezir himself conducted them with every detail of oriental ceremony and display to the Great Palace of the Fatimids. They were led by mysterious corridors and through guarded doors, where stalwart Sudanis saluted with naked swords. They reached a spacious court, open to the sky, and surrounded by arcades resting on marble pillars; the panelled ceilings were carved and inlaid in gold and colours; the pavement was rich mosaic. The unaccustomed eyes of the rude knights opened wide with wonder at the taste and refinement that met them at every step;– here they saw marble fountains, birds of many notes and wondrous plumage, strangers to the western world; there, in a further hall, more exquisite even than the first, "a variety of animals such as the ingenious hand of the painter might depict, or the license of the poet invent, or the mind of the sleeper conjure up in the visions of the night,– such, indeed, as the regions of the East and the South bring forth, but the West sees never, and scarcely hears of." At last, after many turns and windings, they reached the throne room, where the multitude of the pages and their sumptuous dress proclaimed the splendour of their lord. Thrice did the vezir, ungirding his sword, prostrate himself to the ground, as though in humble supplication to his god; then, with a sudden rapid sweep, the heavy curtains broidered with gold and pearls were drawn aside, and on a golden throne, robed in more than regal state, the Caliph sat revealed.

Upon comparison, it is easy to see what elements of each Howard drew on when writing *Gates of Empire*, pairing the imagery of Lane-Poole (and Guillaume de Tyr) with the brevity of Lamb and giving the whole a stamp of ownership that forever marks it as the work of Robert E. Howard. And

for the record, the excerpt from *Gates of Empire* is the most dynamic of the three. It illustrates not only Howard's instinctive ability to strike a proper balance between color and movement, but his mastery of the subject matter as well.

While I've singled out *Gates of Empire* for mention, as it is my own personal favorite, the same argument for its historicity can easily apply to the other tales in this collection. Despite what Howard may have believed about his lack of education or poor grasp of Oriental history, the fact remains that he was as meticulous and exacting as a trained historian when it came to winnowing details from his source material – and as flexible as only a master of the writing craft can be about fudging those selfsame details if, in the end, it made for a better story.

"I try to write as true to the actual facts as possible, at least, I try to commit as few errors as possible," he commented to H. P. Lovecraft, in a letter from September or October, 1933. "I like to have my background and setting as accurate and realistic as I can, with my limited knowledge; if I twist facts too much, alter dates as some writers do, or present a character out of keeping with my impressions of the time and place, I lose my sense of reality, and my characters cease to be living and vital things; and my stories center entirely on my conceptions of my characters. Once I lose the 'feel' of my characters, and I might as well tear up what I have written."

Unfortunately, only seven of the stories collected herein saw print in Howard's lifetime; the rest he no doubt submitted to Farnsworth Wright, but the ravages of the Depression – the tightened belts and failing markets – meant any tale Wright passed on had little chance for life thereafter. Howard consigned the unsold stories to his trunk and moved on. By 1933, *Oriental Stories* (which by then had been saddled with a ridiculous new name, *Magic Carpet Magazine*) was on its deathbed. It would cease publication in January of 1934.

With the demise of his primary historical market, the question becomes, then, why didn't Howard submit his tales to the premier historical pulp of the day, *Adventure*? It was in the pages of *Adventure* that a young Robert E. Howard first encountered the works of Harold Lamb and Talbot Mundy; on at least two occasions, in February and July of 1924, Howard submitted lists of research questions to the magazine's *Ask Adventure* column. But from 1921 onward, his every attempt to break in as a writer met with rejection – sometimes silent, but often with the added encouragement of the

editor wanting to see more of his work (for most writers, the latter kind of rejection is golden … it tells us we're not far from the mark and should persevere just a little longer).

Despite coming close on several occasions, Howard seemingly preferred *not* to send his later work to *Adventure*, even when encouraged to do so by writers he admired. He commented to his friend Tevis Clyde Smith, in a letter dated May of 1932: "Kirk Mashburn, a damned good writer, wrote and told me I should have sold it [*Sowers of the Thunder*] to *Adventure* – of which he says he hasn't missed a copy since he found one in a deserted stretch of Florida Everglades many years ago. But if I'd sent it to *Adventure*, they'd have returned it unread, same as usual."

Thus, with *Oriental Stories* a dead market – and *Adventure* an unreachable one – Howard moved on to greener fields. In 1932, even as he was crafting his tales of the Old Orient, Howard had a notion to turn his love for "the roaring, brawling, drunken, bawdy chaos of the Middle Ages" into a new cycle of stories. They would be historical, after a fashion, easier to research by borrowing from every corner of the past while maintaining the conceit of being about a time before recorded history, a "forgotten Hyborian age." And the hero of these tales would be a wild barbarian not unlike Cormac FitzGeoffrey or Turlough Dubh O'Brien or even Baibars himself – a Cimmerian called Conan …

An interesting postscript to this epoch of Howard's life occurred in May of 1936, a month before his untimely death. In a letter, again to H. P. Lovecraft, he sums up the years between 1930 and 1933 with his usual self-deprecation: "Attempts to make a living by writing historical fiction proved a flop."

Perhaps Robert E. Howard did not make a living from historical fiction, but he made something better: a legacy … one as enduring and colorful as the myths and tales of his beloved Middle Ages.

Scott Oden
October 2009

Spears of Clontarf

I
The Word of War

"War is in the wind – the ravens are gathering."

Conn the thrall let fall a huge armload of logs before the cavernous fireplace and faced about to meet the gaze of his sombre master. Conn was tall and massively yet rangily built, with broad sloping shoulders, a mighty, hairy chest, and long heavily muscled arms. His features were in keeping with his bodily aspect – a strong stubborn jaw, low slanting forehead topped by a shock of tawny tousled hair which added to the wildness of his appearance, as did his cold blue eyes. Garments he wore none, except a loin cloth; his own wolfish ruggedness was protection enough against the weather, ordinarily. For he was a slave in an age when even the masters lived lives ferociously hard and hardening.

Now Conn faced his master, and flexing his mighty arms absently, asked: "What was it that the farers in the longship shouted to us this morning, when we were out in the fishing boat?"

"You heard them, did you not, fool?" harshly asked Wolfgar Snorri's son. "Can you not understand human speech? As the dragon-ship swept past the point, the Vikings shouted to me that there was a gathering of eagles on the east coast of that cursed Ireland – Brian Boru is moving against King Sitric of Dublin, and the word has gone to all the sea-farers to gather for the slaughter. This time the sea-kings will crush that doddering old fool and his naked kerns, once and for all. It shall be as it was in the days of Thorgils the Conqueror. Too long have the kings of Dublin borne the insolence of the western Gaels."

Conn nodded, slowly. "It was in my mind that that was the word the sea-wolves shouted, but I wished to hear it from your lips, because I am slow of comprehension sometimes."

Wolfgar Snorri's son scowled. Like the slave, the Norseman was a typical figure of his age – tall, massive, with fierce intolerant eyes and a heavy golden beard. A son of those fierce Vikings who conquered and settled in the Orkneys, he was a slayer and a plunderer, who lived like a petty king in his own steading and recognized no authority save his own. Even as he sat in the comparative safety of his own skalli-hall, he wore a pliant shirt of

scale mail and was girt with a broad metal-buckled belt from which hung a long straight sword in a leather scabbard.

The thrall's eyes strayed covetously to the blade; he said: "There will be a noble splintering of spears when the Ard-righ of Erin meets the sea-kings. I should be among his weapon-men."

Wolfgar snorted in high disdain. "Your life would soon be parted from your body. The Vikings will take the heads of the Dalcassians to adorn their serpent-prows. As for you – why, you fool, Brian Boru would hang you to an oak limb were you to venture into his kingdom."

"He was wrathful when I broke the truce with Melaghlin and slew a man of Meath, it is true," admitted the big Gael frankly. "But though I was forced to flee from the land of my birth, I have no reason to love the Viking-folk. Thorwald Raven took me when I was weak from hunger and wounds – for the life of an outlaw is hard – and put this collar on my neck." The thrall touched a heavy copper ring which encircled his corded throat. "Then he sold me to you – "

"And cheated me," snarled the Norseman. "Why I have not cut the blood-eagle on your stubborn back long ago, I cannot understand."

"I've done the work of three men," answered the thrall boldly. "I have not been backward when the swords were singing. I have stood at your back and mowed down carles like wheat when you warred with your neighbors. And in return you have given me – crusts from your board, a bare earth floor to sleep upon, and deep scars in my back because I would not call you master or fight for you against my own people."

"Well, dog," growled the Norseman, angrily tugging at his golden beard, "do you want to be petted like a Saxon girl?"

"I want to be free," answered the thrall calmly. "I was not born into slavery – that's why you've never broken me. No man ever broke a kern born in the western hills. We are brothers to the eagle.

"Well, I've borne your abuse and waited because each time I was minded to take your throat between my fingers and crush out your black heart, the thought came to me that the time was not yet. If I escaped from you I would still be an outlaw. But now that the Gaels are gathering to war upon the foreigners, I see my way clearly enough. King Brian will need all the weapon-men he can muster; it is not likely he will hang me when I come to strike a blow for the clan. The time has come; I will kill you and take that sword – which was once the sword of King Murkertagh – and I will fare

forth. I will go in your strongest fishing boat; it is no short voyage from Orkneyar to Erin and the sea is wild with the storms of spring, but better drown in a good effort than die under the lash of a pirate."

Wolfgar, during this speech, which the thrall had spoken as calmly as though discussing the crops or the weather, had sat gaping in dumbfounded amazement. Now he exclaimed: "You addle-witted fool! Are you yet to be taught I am not a man with whom to jest?"

"Here is no jest," answered Conn and Wolfgar suddenly read the fixed intent in the thrall's cold eyes.

"You Irish dog!" roared the Norseman, leaping in frantic haste from his bench. His sword flashed from its scabbard but in the same instant Conn, quick as a leaping tiger, snatched up a log of fire-wood and struck with all the ferocious power of his iron muscles. The crude weapon crushed Wolfgar Snorri's son's head like an egg-shell and the master of the steading fell like a slaughtered ox in a pool of his own blood.

Swiftly Conn bent and caught up the sword which had fallen from the nerveless hand; he tore off the belt that encircled the dead man's waist and buckled it about his own body. A quick glance about showed him the vast hall was empty; no one had seen the deed. Conn caught up a bear-skin at random, to serve as a cloak, and fled the skalli.

The big thrall knew his limitations; he realized that if anyone stopped him and questioned him concerning his possession of his master's sword and the blood on his hands, he could not reply with subtlety enough to allay suspicion. His only safety lay in swift flight, before the body was discovered.

Luck, so long a stranger to the giant Gael, at last favored him. No one saw him emerge from the skalli and run swiftly between the store-houses and stables, heading for the shore of the small bay on which the steading was situated. There was peace between the wolves of the Orkneys; vigilance was relaxed as the carles and their masters busied themselves at their various occupations.

Conn was beyond the cluster of log-built houses before someone spied and hailed him, in swift suspicion at his haste. When he did not stop, the carle who had hailed him shouted for his fellows and pursuit began, though they did not yet know the reason for his flight.

But his start was long; bent low in fear of arrows, he raced down the slight slope to the beach where lay the fishing boats. A single carle gaped at

him stupidly as with swift strokes he stove in all but one.

"Aside, Hrut!" gasped the Gael, casting free the painter of the remaining boat and preparing to shove off. The pursuers were nearing fast.

"But you cannot put to sea now," protested the slow-witted carle. "A storm is brewing – and why do they shout at you – ? – "

He dropped like a log under the impact of Conn's left fist against his temple. Working with frantic haste the Gael pushed off and plied the oars mightily, as the yelling Orkneymen gained the beach. Arrows hissed about him and one ripped the skin on his shoulder, spattering blood. Then the rising wind caught the small sail and the tiny boat leaped like a spurred horse and went dancing swiftly across the white-capped waves.

"Aye," muttered Conn grimly, as he steered without a backward glance at his erstwhile masters who brandished their swords along the beach and howled fearful threats. "Aye – a storm is rising on Erin and red will be the spray of the gale!"

II
The Weregirl of Craglea

The spring gale had blown itself out. The sky smiled blue overhead and the sea lay placid as a pool, with only a few scattered bits of drift-wood along the beaches to give mute evidence of her treachery. Along the strand rode a lone horseman, his saffron cloak whipping out behind him, his yellow hair blowing about his face in the breeze. He was a young man, tall, fair and comely, and his garments and weapons were those of a chief.

And now he suddenly reined up so short that his spirited steed reared and snorted. From among the sand dunes had risen a man, tall and powerful, of wild shock-headed aspect, and naked but for a loin-cloth.

"Who are you to thus accost me?" demanded the horseman. "You who bear the sword of a chief, yet have the appearance of a masterless man, and wear the collar of a serf withal?"

"I am Conn, young sir," answered the wanderer. "Once an outlaw – once a thrall – always a man of King Brian's, whether he will or no. And I know you – you are Dunlang O'Hartigan, friend and companion-in-arms to Murrogh, son of Brian, prince of the Dalcassians."

"What do you here?"

"I came from Torka in the Orkneys in an open boat, flung down as a chip is thrown upon the tide. The gale took me in her fangs last night – by Crom, I know not why or how I am alive today! I only know that I fought the sea in the boat until the boat sank under my feet, and then fought her in her naked waves until I lost all consciousness. None could have been more surprized than I when I came to myself this dawn lying on the beach like a piece of driftwood, more dead than alive. I have lain in the sun since, trying to warm the cold tang of the sea out of my bones."

"By the saints, Conn," said Dunlang, "I like your spirit."

"I hope King Brian likes it as well," grunted the kern. "He has sworn to hang me on sight for a matter of blood-feud."

"Attach yourself to my train," answered Dunlang. "I will speak for you. King Brian has weightier matters upon his mind than a single man-killing. This very day the opposing hosts lie drawn up for the death-grip."

“Good,” grunted Conn. “I feared I would not arrive in time – think you the spear-shattering will fall on the morrow?”

“Not by King Brian’s will,” said Dunlang. “He is loath to shed blood on Good Friday. But who knows but the heathen will come down on us?”

Conn laid a hand on Dunlang’s stirrup-leather and strode beside him as the steed moved leisurely along.

“There is a notable gathering of weapon-men?”

“More than twenty thousand warriors on each side; the bay of Dublin is dark with the dragonships from the mouth of the Liffey to Edar. From the Orkneys comes Jarl Sigurd with his raven banner. From the Isle of Man comes Broder with twenty longships. From the Danelagh in England comes Prince Amlaff, son of the king of Norway, with two thousand armed men. From all lands held by the Gall, the hosts have gathered – from the Orkneys, the Shetlands, the Hebrides – from Scotland and England and Germany, as well as from Scandinavia.

“There are among them, our spies say, a thousand men armed in steel mail from crown to heel – Sigurd’s men, and Broder’s; these fight in a solid wedge and the Dalcassians may be hard put to break that iron wall. Yet, God willing, we shall prevail. Then among the chiefs there are, besides those I have named, Anrad, Hrafn the Red, Platt of Danemark, Thorstein and his comrade-in-arms, Asmund, and Thorwald Raven who calls himself Jarl of the Hebrides.”

At that name Conn grinned savagely and fingered his copper collar.

“It is a great gathering if Sigurd and Broder come together.”

“That was the doing of Gormlaith,” answered Dunlang.

“Word had come to the Orkneys that Brian had divorced Kormlada,” said Conn, unconsciously giving the queen her Norse name.

“Aye – and her heart is black with hate against him. Strange it is that a woman so fair of form and countenance should have the soul of a devil.”

“That’s God’s truth, my lord. And what of her brother, Mailmora?”

“Who but he is the instigator of the whole war?” cried Dunlang angrily. “The hatred between him and Murrogh, so long smoldering, has at last burst into flame, firing the whole kingdom. Both were in the wrong; Murrogh perhaps more than Mailmora. Gormlaith goaded her brother on. I did not believe King Brian acted wisely when he gave honors to those he had once warred against. It was not well when he married Gormlaith and gave his daughter to Gormlaith’s son, Sitric of Dublin. When he took Gormlaith into

his palace, he took in the seeds of strife and hatred. She is a wanton; once she was the wife of Amlaff Cuaran, king of Dublin; then she was the wife of King Malachi of Meath, and he put her aside because of her wickedness."

"What of Melaghlin?" asked Conn.

"He seems to have forgotten the struggle in which Brian wrested the crown of Ireland from him," said Dunlang. "Together the two kings move against the Danes and the king of Leinster."

As they had conversed they had passed along the bare coast until they had come into a rough broken stretch of cliffs and boulders; and there they halted suddenly. On a boulder sat a girl, clad in a shimmering green garment whose pattern was so much like scales that for a bewildered instant Conn thought himself to be gazing on a mermaid come out of the deep.

"Eevin!" Dunlang swung down from his horse, tossing the reins to Conn, and advancing, took her small hands in his. "You sent for me and I have come – you have been weeping!"

Conn, holding the steed, felt an urge to retire discreetly as superstitious qualms touched him. Eevin was not like any other girl he had ever seen; she was small and childish in stature, dark, with soft black eyes and a wealth of black hair. Her whole aspect was different from the women of the Norse-folk and the Gaels alike, and Conn knew her to be a member of that fading race which had occupied the land before the coming of his ancestors; some of them still dwelt in caverns along the sea and deep in unfrequented forests. The Irish looked on them as sorcerers and first-cousins to the faeries, and in after-ages legends lent them complete supernatural aspect, as the "little people."

"Dunlang!" the girl caught him in a convulsive embrace. "You must not go into the battle – the weird of far-sight is on me and I know if you go to the war you will die! Come away with me – I will hide you – I will show you dim caverns like the castles of deep-sea kings, and shadowy forests where no man has set foot save my people!"

"Eevin, my love!" exclaimed Dunlang, greatly disturbed. "You ask me that which is beyond all human power. When my clan moves into battle, I must be at Murrogh's side, aye, though sure death be my portion. I love you beyond all life, but ask of me something easier, for by the honor of my clan, this is a thing impossible!"

“I feared as much,” she answered dully. “This is punishment, perhaps, visited on me – for of all my people, I alone love a man of the fair folk. I love and I have lost; for my sight is the far sight of the Pictish folk who see through the Veil and the mists of life, behind the past and beyond the future. You will go into battle and the harps will keen for you; and Eevin of Craglea will weep for you until she melts in tears and the salt tears mingle with the cold salt sea.”

Dunlang bowed his head unspeaking for her young voice vibrated with the ancient sorrow of womankind; and even the rough kern shuffled his feet uneasily.

“I have brought you a gift against the time of battle,” she said, bending lithely and lifting something which caught the sheen of the sun. “It may not save you, the ghosts in my soul have whispered – but I hope without hope in my woman’s heart. You will wear it – oh, wear it, my love!”

Dunlang stared uncertainly at what she spread before him. Conn, edging closer and craning his neck, saw a hauberk of strange workmanship and a helmet such as he had never seen before. The helmets of that age were mainly plain steel caps, sometimes adorned with horns, or in the case of the Saxons and Vikings, with a bronze boar couchant; occasionally furnished with a nasal-piece, or a mail drop behind which fell about the shoulders. Vizored head-pieces had not yet been dreamed of. But the helmet which Eevin held appealingly toward Dunlang was a heavy affair made to slip over the entire head and rest on the neck-pieces of the hauberk. There was no movable vizor, merely a slit cut in the front through which to see. It was fashioned something on the order of the “pot-helmet” worn by the first knights a century later. But the workmanship was of an earlier, more civilized age, which no man then living could duplicate.

Dunlang looked at the armor askance; he had the characteristic Celtic antipathy toward mail. The Britons who faced Caesar’s legionaries fought naked, judging a man cowardly who cased himself in metal, and in later ages the Irish clans entertained the same ideas regarding Strongbow’s mail-clad knights.*

“Eevin,” said Dunlang, “my brothers will laugh at me if I enclose myself in iron, like a Dane. How can a man have full freedom of limb, weighted by such garments? Of all the Gaels, only Turlogh Dubh wears full mail.”

“And is any man of the Gael less brave than he?” she exclaimed passionately. “Oh, you of the fair folk are foolish! For ages the iron-clad

Danes have trampled you, when you might have swept them out of existence long ago, but for your foolish pride."

"Not altogether pride, Eevin," argued Dunlang. "Of what avail is mail or plated armor against the Dalcassian axe which cuts through iron like cloth?"

"Mail would turn the swords of the Danes," she answered. "And not even an axe of the O'Briens would rend this armor. Long it has lain in the caverns of my people, carefully protected from rust. He who wore it was a warrior of Rome in the long, long ago before the legions were withdrawn from Britain. In an ancient war on the borders of Wales, it fell into the hands of my people, and because he who wore it was a great prince, my people have treasured it. Now I beg you to wear it, if you love me!"

Dunlang took it hesitantly, nor could he know that it was the armor worn by a gladiator in the days of the later Roman empire, nor wonder by what strange freak of chance it came to adorn the body of an officer in the British legion, in the days when the imperial twilight sent forth the waning ranks with broken weapons and strange harness. Little of that Dunlang knew; knowledge and education were for the monks and priests; a fighting man was kept too busy to cultivate the arts and sciences.

He took the armor and because he loved the dark little girl, he made a vast concession: "Very well, Eevin, if it will fit me, I will wear it for your sake."

"It will fit," she answered. "But oh, Dunlang, I shall see you no more!"

"It rests in the hands of God, little one," he answered gently. "Many will fall, and I may fall in the foremost charge; yet it may be that once again we shall walk hand in hand through the green forest when the twilight shakes out her grey mantle over the hills of Craglea."

She shook her head and her voice broke in a sob; speechless she held out her childish arms and he gathered her hungrily to him; a moment he crushed her close to him, while Conn looked away, then Dunlang gently unlocked her clinging arms from about his neck, kissed her, and tore himself away.

Without a word or a backward glance he mounted his steed and rode away, with Conn trotting easily alongside. Looking back, in the gathering dusk, the kern saw Eevin reach out her white arms in a wild poignant gesture of despair, then fall forward in a torrent of weeping.

III

The Gathering of the Eagles

The camp fires sent up showers of sparks and illumined the land like day. In the distance loomed the grim walls of Dublin, dark and ominously silent; before those walls flickered other fires where the warriors of Leinster, under their king Mailmora, whetted their axes for the coming battle. Out in the bay the starlight glinted on myriad sails, shield-rails and arching serpent-prows. Between the city and the fires of the Irish host stretched the plain of Clontarf, bordered by Tomar's Wood, dark and rustling in the night, and the Liffey's dark star-flecked waters.

Before his tent, the firelight playing on his white beard and glinting from his undimmed eagle eyes, sat the great King Brian Boru among his chiefs. The king was old – seventy-three winters had passed over his lion-like head – long years crammed with fierce wars and bloody intrigues. Yet his back was straight, his arm unwithered, his voice deep and resonant. His chiefs stood about him, tall proud warriors with war-hardened hands and eyes whetted by the sun and the winds and the high places. Tigerish princes in their rich tunics, green girdles, leathern sandals and saffron mantles caught with great golden brooches.

They were an array of war-eagles: Murrogh, Brian's eldest son, the pride of all Erin – tall, broad-shouldered, mightily muscled, with wide blue eyes

that were never placid, but danced with mirth, dulled with sadness or blazed with fury; Murrogh's young son Turlogh, a slender, supple lad of fifteen with golden locks and a frank eager face – tense with anticipation of trying his hand for the first time in the great game of war. And there was that other Turlogh, his cousin – Turlogh Dubh – Black Turlogh, who was only a few years older, but who had already his full stature and was famed throughout all Erin for his berserk rages and the cunning of his deadly axe-play. And there was Meathla O'Faelan, prince of Desmond or South Munster, and his kin – the Great Stewards of Scotland, Lennox, and Donald of Mar, who had crossed the Irish channel with their wild Highlanders – tall men, somber and gaunt and silent. And there was Dunlang O'Hartigan, and O'Hyne, chief of Connacht. But O'Kelly, brother chief of the O'Hyne, and prince of Hy Many, was in the tent of his uncle, King Malachi, which was pitched in the camp of the Meathmen, apart from the Dalcassians, and King Brian was brooding on the matter. For since the set of the sun, O'Kelly had been closeted with the King of Meath and no man knew what passed between them.

Nor was Donagh, son of Brian, among the chiefs before the royal tent, for he was a-field with a band ravaging the holdings of Mailmora in Leinster.

Now Dunlang O'Hartigan approached the king, leading with him Conn the kern.

"My king," quoth Dunlang, "here is a man who was outlawed aforetime, who has spent vile durance among the Gall, and who has risked his life by storm and sea to return and fight under your banner. From the Orkneys in an open boat he came, naked and alone, and the sea cast him all but lifeless on the sand."

Brian stiffened; his memory was as sharp as a whetted sword, even in small things.

"Thou!" he said. "Aye, I remember him. Well, Conn, have you come back, and you with your red hands?"

"Aye, King Brian," answered Conn stolidly. "My hands are red, it's true, and so I would like to wash off the stain in Danish blood. I slew wrongfully, well I know, but no sorrow of mine can undo the act."

"And you dare stand before me, to whom your life is forfeit?"

"This alone I know, King Brian," said Conn boldly. "I am the son of a man who was with you at Sulcoit and the sack of Limerick, and before that

followed you in your days of wandering, and was one of the fifteen warriors who remained to you, when King Mahon your brother came seeking you in the forest. And I am the grandson of a man who followed Murkertagh of the Leather Cloaks, and my people have fought the Danes since the time of Thorgils. You need men who can strike strong blows and it is my right to die in battle against mine ancient enemies, rather than shamefully at the end of a rope."

King Brian nodded, somewhat absently. "You have spoken well. Take your life; your days of outlawry are at an end. King Malachi perhaps would say otherwise, since it was a man of his you slew – but – " he paused; an old doubt ate at his soul as he thought of the king of Meath.

"Let it be," he repeated. "Let it rest until after the battle – mayhap that will be world's end for us all."

Dunlang stepped toward Conn and laid hand on the copper collar.

"Let us cut this away; you are a free man now."

Conn shook his head. "Not until I have slain Thorwald Raven who put it on my neck. I'll wear it into battle as a sign of no quarter."

"That is a noble sword you wear, kern," said Murrogh suddenly.

"Aye, my lord," answered Conn. "Murkertagh of the Leather Cloaks wielded this blade until Blacair the Dane slew him at Ardee."

"It is not fitting a kern should wear the sword of a king," said Murrogh brusquely. "Let one of the chiefs take it and give him an axe instead."

Conn's iron fingers locked about the hilt.

"He who would take the sword from me had best give me the axe first," he said grimly. "And that suddenly."

Murrogh's hot temper blazed suddenly and with an oath he strode toward Conn who met him eye to eye and gave back not a step.

"Be at ease, my son," ordered King Brian. "Let the kern keep the blade; he has striven hard to gain it."

Murrogh shrugged his mighty shoulders and then his mood changed.

"Aye, keep it and follow me into battle; we shall see if a king's sword in a kern's hand can hew as wide a path as a prince's blade."

"My lords," said Conn, "it may be God's will I fall in the first onset – but the scars of slavery burn deep in my back this night, and may the dogs eat my bones if I am backward when the spears are splintering."

IV
The Castle of the Sea-Kings

And while King Brian communed with his chiefs on the plains above Clontarf, a grisly ritual was being enacted within the gloomy castle that was at once the fortress and palace of Dublin's king. With good reason did Christians fear and hate those looming walls; Dublin was a pagan city, ruled by savage heathen kings, and dark and fearsome were the deeds done therein.

In an inner chamber in the castle stood the Viking Broder, somberly watching a ghastly sacrifice on a grim black altar. On that monstrous stone writhed a naked frothing thing that had been a comely youth; brutally bound and gagged he could only twist convulsively beneath the dripping inexorable dagger in the hands of the white-bearded wild-eyed priest of Odin.

The blade hacked through flesh and thew and bone; blood gushed in horrid torrents to be caught in a broad copper bowl, which the priest, with his red-dabbled beard, held high, invoking Odin in a frenzied chant. His thin bony fingers tore the yet pulsing heart from the butchered breast and his wild half-mad eyes scanned it with avid intentness.

"What of your divinations, priest?" demanded Broder impatiently.

"If ye fight not on Good Friday, as the Christians call it," said the priest, "your host will be utterly routed and all your chiefs slain; if ye fight on Good Friday, King Brian will die – but he will win the day."

Broder cursed with cold venom. "A noble choice is left us, by Thor! Yet if I fall, I would take Brian with me to Helheim. Enough of such mummery! We go against the Gaels on the morrow, fall fair, fall foul!" He turned and strode from the chamber.

He traversed a winding corridor and entered another, more spacious chamber, adorned, like all the Dublin king's palace, with the loot of all the world – gold-chased weapons, rare tapestries, rich rugs, divans from Byzantium and the East – plunder taken from all peoples by the roving Norsemen; for Dublin was the center of the Vikings' wide-flung world – the head-quarters whence they fared forth to loot the kings of the earth.

A queenly form rose to greet the sombre sea-king. Kormlada, whom the Gaels called Gormlaith, was indeed fair, but there was deep cruelty in her face and in her hard scintillant eyes. Of mixed Irish and Danish blood, she looked the part of a barbaric queen, with her pendant ear-rings, her golden armlets and anklets and her silver breast-plates set with jewels. But for these breast-plates her only garments were a short silken skirt which came half-way to her knees and was held in place by a wide silk girdle about her lithe waist, and sandals of soft red leather. Her hair was red-gold, her eyes light grey and glittering. Queen she had been, of Dublin, of Meath and of Thomond. And queen she was still, for she held her son Sitric and her brother Mailmora in the palm of her slim white hand.

Carried off in a raid in her childhood by Amlaff Cuaran, king of Dublin, she had early discovered her power over men. As the child-wife of the rough Dane, she had swayed his kingdom at her will, and her ambitions increased with her power.

Now she faced Broder with her luring, mysterious smile, but secret uneasiness ate at her. Kormlada was a wanton; she snared all men by her wiles; but there was one man she feared in all the world, and one woman. And the man was Broder. With him she was never entirely certain of her course; she duped him as she duped all men, but it was with misgivings.

“What of the words of the priest, Broder?” she asked lightly.

“In the bleeding heart he read it,” the Viking answered moodily. “If we wait, we lose the battle. If we attack on the morrow, Brian wins but falls. We attack on the morrow – the more because my spies tell me Donagh is ravaging Leinster with a strong band, and cannot reach the battle-field by the morrow. We have sent spies to King Malachi, who has an old grudge against Brian, urging him to desert the King – or at least to stand aside and give no aid to either. We have offered him rich rewards and Brian’s lands to rule. Ha! Thor grant he falls into our trap! Not gold but a bloody sword we will give him. With Brian crushed, we will turn on Malachi and tread him into the dust. But first we must conquer Brian.”

She clenched her white hands in savage exultation. “Bring me his head! I will hang it above our bridal-bed!”

“I have heard strange tales,” said Broder sombrely. “Sigurd has boasted in his wine cups.”

Kormlada started and scanned the inscrutable countenance closely. Again she felt a quiver of fear as she gazed at the sombre Viking, with his tall,

strong stature, his dark menacing face and his heavy black locks which he wore braided and caught in his sword-belt.

"What has Sigurd said?" she queried, striving to make her voice casual.

"When Sitric came to me in my skalli on the Isle of Man," said Broder, "it was his oath that if I came to his aid, I should sit on the throne of Ireland with you as my queen. Now that fool of an Orkneyman – Sigurd – boasts in his ale that *he* was promised the same reward."

She forced a laugh. "He was drunk."

Broder burst into wild curses as the violent passion of the Viking surged up in him.

"You lie, you wanton!" he grated, seizing her white wrist in an iron grip. "You were born to lure men to their doom! But you cannot play fast and loose with Broder of Man!"

"You are mad!" she cried, twisting vainly in his grasp. "Release me or I will call my guards!"

"Call them!" he snarled. "And I will slash the heads from their bodies. Cross me now and blood shall run ankle-deep in Dublin's streets. By Thor, there will be no city left for Brian to burn! Mailmora, Sitric, Sigurd, Amlaff – I will cut all their throats and drag you naked to my longship by your yellow hair! Now dare to call out!"

And she dared not. He forced her to her knees, twisting her white arm brutally till she bit her lip to keep from screaming.

"Confess!" he snarled. "You promised Sigurd the same thing you promised me, knowing neither of us would throw away his life for less."

"No! – no! – no!" she shrieked. "I swear by the ring of Thor – " then as the agony grew unbearable she cried out: "Yes! – yes! – I promised him – let me go – oh, let me go!"

"So!" the Viking tossed her contemptuously onto a pile of silken cushions where she lay whimpering and disheveled.

"You promised me and you promised Sigurd," said he, looming darkly above her, "but the promise you made me, you will keep – else you had better never been born. The throne of Ireland is a small thing beside my desire for you – if I cannot have you, no one shall."

"But what of Sigurd?"

"He will fall in battle – or afterwards," he answered grimly.

"Good enough!" Dire indeed was the extremity in which Kormlada did not have her wits about her. "It is you I love, Broder; I only promised him

because he would not aid us otherwise – ”

“Love!” the grim Viking laughed bitterly. “You love Kormlada – no one else. I understand you; but you will keep your vow to me or you will rue it.” And turning on his heel, he strode from her chamber.

Kormlada rose, rubbing her arm where the blue marks of his savage fingers marred her white skin.

“May he fall in the first onset,” she said between her teeth. “If either survive may it be that tall fool, Sigurd – methinks he would be a husband more easily managed than that black-haired savage. I will perforce marry him if he survives the battle, but by the ring of Thor, he shall not long press the throne of Ireland – I will send him to join Brian – ”

“You speak as if King Brian were already dead,” a silvery mocking voice brought Kormlada about suddenly to face the other person in the world she feared besides Broder. Her eyes widened as from behind a satin hanging stepped a small dark girl clad in shimmering green.

“Eevin!” Kormlada gasped, recoiling. “Stand back – cast no spell on me, little witch – ”

“Who am I to bewitch the great queen who has bewitched so many men?” asked Eevin mockingly, secure in the knowledge of the queen’s superstitious fears; to the Danish woman the Pictish girl was something fearsome and unhuman – an uncanny sprite of the deep woods.

“How came you in my palace?” demanded Kormlada with a weak effort at imperiousness.

“How came the breeze through the trees?” answered the forest girl. “Your guards watched well enough, but do the oxen know when the field mice run through the wheat? You of the fair folk are like blind men and deaf when the dark people steal among you.”

“Why do you spy on me?” asked the queen angrily.

“To see what the great Gormlaith does when a Viking manhandles her in her own chamber,” taunted Eevin. “So many men have knelt before Gormlaith, it was right merry to see Gormlaith on her knees before Broder.”

At this heckling the Danish queen went white, clenching her hands until the nails bit into the delicate palms and brought trickles of blood.

“I will have you thrown into a dungeon for the rats to eat, you witch!” she whispered, so choked with fury she could not speak louder.

Eevin’s dainty lip curled with contempt.

“You dare not touch me; you fear I might put on you a spell to rob you of that cruel beauty whereby you rule men. Now tell me, quickly: what was it Broder told you before I came into this chamber?”

“He had been consulting the oracle of the sea-people,” Kormlada answered sullenly.

“The blood and the torn heart?” Eevin’s lips writhed with disgust. “Faugh! You Danars are but bloody beasts! What did it portend?”

“The priest bade Broder attack tomorrow,” answered the queen, not considering, with the usual illogic of the primitive, that if, as she believed, Eevin were indeed a witch, she should know without asking.

Eevin stood with bent head for a moment, then turned and, slipping through the hangings, vanished from Kormlada’s sight. The proud queen, who in the last few minutes had been bullied and humiliated for the first time in her cruel life, turned like an angry pantheress and left the chamber in a brooding rage that promised little good for anyone who had dealings with her.

Alone in his tent with the heavily armed gallaglachs ranged outside, King Brian woke suddenly from a fitful and unquiet sleep. The thick torches which burned without illumined the interior of his tent and in their light he saw a small childish figure.

“Eevin!” he sat up, half startled, half provoked. “By my soul, child, well for kings that your people take no part in the intrigues of the conquering folk, when you can steal under the very noses of the guards into a guarded tent. Do you seek Dunlang?”

The Pictish girl shook her head sadly. “I see him no more alive, great king. Were I to go to him now, my own black sorrow might unman him. I will come to him among the dead tomorrow.”

King Brian involuntarily shivered.

“But it is not of my woes that I came to speak, great king,” the girl continued wearily. “It is not the way of the forest folk to mix in the quarrels of the fair folk – but I love a fair man. This night I was in Sitric’s castle and talked with Gormlaith.”

King Brian winced at the name of his divorced queen, but spoke steadily: “And your news?”

“Broder strikes on the morrow.”

The king shook his head heavily.

“I am a true Christian, I trust, and it vexes my soul to spill blood on the Holy Day. But if God wills it, we will not await their onslaught, but will march at dawn to meet them. I will send a swift runner to bring back Donagh and his band – ”

Again Eevin shook her head.

“Nay, great king. Let Donagh live; after the great battle the Dalcassians will need strong arms to brace the sceptre.”

Brian gazed fixedly at her for an instant. “I read my own doom in those words, little witch-girl of the woods; have you cast my fate?”

Eevin spread her hands helplessly. “My lord, Gormlaith the pagan believes me to be a sorceress, breathing spells and black dooms. You are wise and know otherwise, yet even you look on me as a person uncanny. I cannot rend the Veil at will; I know neither spells nor sorcery; not in smoke nor blood have I read it, but a weird has come upon me and I see – vaguely – through flame and the dim clash of battle – ”

“And I shall fall?”

She bowed her face in her hands. “It is written.”

“Well, let it fall as God wills,” said King Brian tranquilly. “I have lived long and deeply. Weep not, little girl of the forest; through the darkest mists of gloom and night, dawn yet rises on the world. My clan shall reverence you in the long days to come. And go now, for the night wanes toward morn and I would make my peace with God.”

And Eevin of Craglea went like a shadow from the tent of the king.

V

The Feasting of the Eagles

Through the mist of the white dawn men moved like ghosts and weapons clanked eerily. Conn stretched his muscular arms, yawned cavernously and loosened his great blade in its sheath.

"This is the day the ravens drink blood, my lord," he grinned, and Dunlang O'Hartigan nodded absently.

"Come hither and aid me to don this cursed cage," said the young Dalcassian. "For Eevin's sake I will wear it, but I had rather go into battle stark naked, by the saints!"

The Gaels were on the move, marching from Kilmainham in the same formation in which they intended to enter the battle. First came the Dalcassians, big rangy men in their saffron tunics, with a round buckler of steel-braced yew wood on the left arm and the right hand gripping the dreaded Dalcassian axe against which no armor could stand. This axe differed greatly from the heavy two-handed weapon of the Danes; the Irish wielded it with one hand, the thumb stretched along the haft to guide the blow, and they had attained a skill at axe-fighting never before or since equalled. Hauberks they had none, neither the gallaglachs nor the kerns, though some of their chiefs, like Murrogh, wore light steel caps. But the tunics of warrior and chief alike had been woven with such skill and steeped in vinegar until their remarkable toughness afforded some protection against sword and arrow.

At the head of the Dalcassians strode Prince Murrogh, his fierce eyes alight, smiling as though he went to a feast instead of a slaughtering. On one side went Dunlang O'Hartigan in his Roman corselet, and on the other side the two Turloghs – the son of Murrogh, and Turlogh Dubh, who alone of all the Dalcassians, always went into battle fully armored. He looked grim enough, despite his youth, with his dark face and smoldering blue eyes, clad as he was in a full shirt of black mail, mail leggings and a steel helmet with a mail drop, and bearing a spiked buckler. Unlike the rest of the chiefs who preferred their swords in battle, Turlogh Dubh fought with an axe he himself had forged and of all the Gaels, none could match him at

axe-fighting. So these chiefs led the warriors of Clare to the slaughter and behind Dunlang came Conn, bearing the Roman helmet.

Close behind the Dalcassians were the two companies of the Scotch with their chiefs, the Stewards of Scotland, Lennox and Donald of Mar, who, long skilled in war with the Saxons, wore helmets with horse-hair crests, and coats of mail. With them came the men of South Munster commanded by Prince Meathla O'Faelan.

The third division consisted of the warriors of Connacht, wild men of the west, shock-headed and ferocious, naked but for their wolf-skins, with their chiefs O'Kelly and O'Hyne. And O'Kelly marched as a man whose soul is heavy within him, for the shadow of his meeting with King Malachi the night before fell gauntly across him.

A little apart from the three main divisions marched the kerns and gallaglachs of Meath, their king riding slowly before them.

And before all the host rode King Brian Boru on a snow white steed, his white locks blown about his ancient face and his eyes strange and fey, so that the wild kerns gazed upon him with superstitious awe. And so the Gaels came before Dublin.

And there they saw the hosts of Lochlann and of Leinster drawn up in full battle array, stretching in a wide crescent from Dubhgall's Bridge to the narrow river Tolka which cuts the plain of Clontarf. Three main divisions there were – the foreign Northmen, the Vikings, with Sigurd and the grim Broder; and flanking them on the one side the fierce Danes of Dublin under their chief, a sombre wanderer whose name no man knew, but who was called by the general name of his race – Dubhgall, The Dark Stranger; and on the other flank the Irish of Leinster with their king Mailmora, brother to Kormlada. The Danish fortress on the hill beyond the Liffey river bristled with armed men where King Sitric guarded the city.

There was but one way into the city from the north – the direction from which the Gaels were advancing – for in those days Dublin lay wholly south of the Liffey: that was the bridge called Dubhgall's Bridge. The Danes stood with one horn of their line guarding this entrance, their ranks curving out toward the Tolka, their backs to the sea. The Gaels advanced along the level plain which stretched between Tomar's Wood and the shore.

With scarce a bow-shot separating the hosts, the Gaels halted and King Brian rode in front of them, holding high a crucifix.

“Sons of Goidhel!” he called in a voice that rang like a trumpet call. “It is not given me to lead you into the fray, as I led you in the days of old. But I have pitched my tent behind your lines, where you must trample me if you flee. You will not flee! Remember a hundred years of outrage and infamy! Remember your burning houses, your slaughtered kin, your ravished women, your babes enslaved! Before you stand your oppressors! On this day our good Lord died for you! There stand the heathen hordes which revile His Name and slay His people! I have but one command to give – Conquer or die!”

The wild hordes yelled like wolves and a forest of axes brandished on high. King Brian bowed his head and his face was suddenly grey.

“Let them lead me back to my tent,” he whispered to Murrogh. “Age has withered me from the play of the axes and my doom is hard upon me. Go forth and may God stiffen your arms to the slaying!”

Now as the king rode slowly back to his tent among his guardsmen, there was a tightening of girdles, a drawing of blades, a dressing of shields. Conn placed the Roman helmet on the head of Dunlang and grinned at the result; thus cased the young chief looked like some mythical iron monster out of Norse legendry. And now the hosts moved inexorably toward each other.

The Vikings had assumed their favorite wedge-shaped formation with Sigurd and Broder with their thousand iron-clad slayers at the tip. The Northmen offered a strong contrast to the loose lines of half-naked Gaels. They moved in compact ranks, armored with horned helmets, heavy scale-mail coats reaching to their knees, and leggings of seasoned wolf-hide braced with iron plates, and bearing great kite-shaped shields of linden-wood with iron rims, and long spears. The thousand warriors in the forefront wore not only heavy hauberks, but long leggings and gauntlets of mail also, so that from crown to heel they were armored. These marched in a solid shield-wall, bucklers overlapping, and over their iron ranks floated the grim raven banner which legend said always brought victory to Sigurd but death to the bearer. Now it was borne by old Rane Asgrimm’s son who felt that the hour of his death was at hand anyway.

At the tip of the wedge, like the point of a spear, were the champions of Lochlann – Broder in his dully glittering blue mail which no blade had ever dinted; Jarl Sigurd, tall, blond-bearded, gleaming in his golden-scaled hauberk; Hrafn the Red, in whose soul lurked a mocking devil that moved him to gargantuan laughter, even in the madness of battle; the comrades

Thorstein and Asmund, tall, fierce chiefs; Prince Amlaff, roving son of the king of Norway; Platt of Danemark; Jarl Thorwald Raven of the Hebrides; Anrad the berserk.

Toward this formidable array the Irish advanced at quick pace in more or less open formation and with scant attempt at orderly ranks. But Malachi and his warriors wheeled suddenly and drew off to the extreme left, taking up their position on the high ground by Cabra. And when Murrogh saw this he cursed beneath his breath and Black Turlogh growled: “Who said an O’Neill forgets an old grudge? By Crom, Murrogh, we may have to guard our backs as well as our breasts, before this fight be won!”

Now suddenly from the Viking ranks strode Platt of Danemark whose red hair floated like a crimson veil about his bare head. The hosts watched eagerly, for in those days few battles began without preliminary single combats.

“Donald!” shouted Platt, his blue eyes blazing with a reckless mirth, flinging up his naked sword so that the rising sun caught it with a sheen of silver. “Where is Donald of Mar? Are you there, Donald, as you were at Rhu Stoir, or do you skulk from the fray?”

“I am here, rogue!” answered the Scotch chief as he strode, tall, gaunt and sombre from among his men, flinging away his scabbard. Highlander and Dane met in the middle space between the hosts, Donald wary as a hunting wolf, Platt leaping in, reckless and head-long, his eyes alight and dancing with a kind of laughing madness. Yet it was the wary Steward’s foot which slipped suddenly on a rolling pebble, and before he could regain

his balance, Platt's sword lunged into him so fiercely the keen point tore through the scales of his corselet and sank deep beneath his heart. Platt yelled in mad exultation and the shout broke in a sudden gasp. Even as he crumpled Donald of Mar lashed out with a dying stroke that split the Dane's head and the two fell together.

Thereat a deep-toned roar went up to the heavens and the two great hosts rolled together like a vast wave.

And then were struck the first blows of a battle such as the world was never to see again. Here were no maneuvers of strategy, no charges of cavalry, no flight of arrows. There forty thousand men fought on foot, hand to hand, man to man, slaying and dying in one mad red chaos. The issue was greater than to decide whether Dane or Gael should rule Ireland; it was Christian against heathen; Jehovah against Odin; it was the last combined onslaught of the Norse races against the world they had looted for three hundred years. It was more; it was the titanic death-throes of a passing epoch – the twilight of a fading age. For on the field of Clontarf the death-knell of the Vikings was struck and Ireland won her last great national victory. Darkness lay behind and before the age of Brian Boru and Clontarf, which was but a brief age of light, swiftly fading into the gloom of anarchy and civil discord that culminated in the coming of the Norman conquerors.

But the men who fought at Clontarf guessed none of this. Red battle broke in howling waves about their spears and they had no time for dreams and prophesies.

The first to shock were the Dalcassians and the Vikings and as they met both lines rocked at the impact. The deep-throated roar of the Norsemen mingled with the wild yells of the Gaels and the Northern spears splintered among the Western axes. Foremost in the fray was Murrogh, his great body leaping and straining as he roared and smote. In each hand he bore a heavy sword and smiting right and left he mowed men down like corn, for neither shield nor helmet stood beneath his terrible blows. And behind him came his warriors slashing and howling like devils.

Against the compact lines of the Dublin Danes the wild tribesmen of Connacht thundered, and the men of South Munster and their Scottish allies fell vengefully on the Irish of Leinster.

Across the plain the iron lines writhed and interwove, slaughtering and dying. Conn, following Dunlang and Murrogh, grinned savagely as he smote home with dripping blade, and his fierce eyes sought for Thorwald

Raven among the spears. But in that mad sea of battle where wild faces came and went like waves, it was difficult to pick out any one man.

At first both lines held without giving an inch; feet braced, straining breast to breast, they snarled and hacked, shield jammed hard against shield. All up and down the line of battle the blades shimmered and flashed like sea-spray in the sun and the deep-toned roar shook the ravens that wheeled like Valkyries above. Then when human flesh and blood could stand no more, the long serried lines began to roll forward or back. The Leinstermen flinched before the savage onslaught of the Munster clans and their Scottish allies, giving back slowly, foot by foot, cursed by their king who fought on foot with a sword in the forefront of the fray.

But on the other flank the Danes of Dublin under the redoubtable Dubhgall had held against the first blasting charge of the western tribes, though their lines reeled at the shock, and now the wild men in their wolf-skins were falling like garnered grain before the Danish axes.

In the center the battle raged most fiercely; the wedge-shaped shield-wall of the foreign Vikings held and against its iron ranks the Dalcassians hurled their half-naked bodies in vain. A ghastly heap ringed that grim wall and Broder and Sigurd began a slow but steady advance, the inexorable onstride of the Vikings, hacking deeper and deeper into the loose formation of the Gaels.

On the walls of Dublin Castle, King Sitric, watching the fight with Kormlada and his wife, exclaimed: “Well do the sea-kings reap the field!” Kormlada’s beautiful eyes were blazing, her white hands clenched in cruel exultation.

“Fall, Brian!” she cried fiercely. “Fall, Murrogh! And, fall, too, Broder! Let the keen ravens feed!”

But at the foremost point of the Gaelic advance, the line held. There, like the convex center of a curving axe-blade, fought Murrogh and his chiefs. The great prince was already streaming blood from gashes on his limbs, but his heavy swords flamed in double strokes that dealt death like a harvest and the chiefs at his side mowed down the corn of battle. Fiercely Murrogh sought to reach Sigurd through the press but the chance of battle had thus far held them apart. Murrogh saw the tall Jarl looming across the waves of spears and heads, striking blows like thunder-strokes, and the sight drove the Gaelic prince to madness. But he could not reach the Viking lord, strive as he would.

“The warriors are forced back,” gasped Dunlang, seeking to shake the sweat from his eyes. The young chief was untouched; spears and axes alike splintered on the Roman helmet or glanced from the ancient cuirass, but he was unused to fighting in armor and felt weighted, hampered, prisoned – like a chained wolf.

Murrogh spared a single swift glance; on either side of the clump of chiefs the gallaglachs were being forced back, slowly, savagely, selling each foot of ground with blood, but unable to halt the irresistible advance of the mailed Northmen. The Vikings were falling too, all along the battle-line, but they closed their ranks and forced their way forward, legs hard-braced, bodies straining, spears driving without cease or pause; through a red surf of dead and dying they ploughed on.

“Turlogh!” gasped Murrogh, dashing the blood and sweat from his eyes. “Haste – break from the fray and go to Malachi! Bid him charge, in God’s name!”

But the frenzy of slaughter was on Black Turlogh; froth was on his lips and his eyes were those of a madman.

“The Devil eat Malachi!” he snarled, splitting a Dane’s skull with a stroke like the slash of a tiger’s paw. “Here is the sword-feast before us!”

“Conn!” exclaimed Murrogh, gripping the big kern’s shoulder and dragging him back from the sword-strokes. “Haste to Malachi – we cannot long abide this press!”

Reluctantly Conn drew away from the fray, clearing his way with mighty strokes. Across the reeling sea of blades and rocking helmets he saw the towering forms of Jarl Sigurd, Broder, Anrad, Hrafn the Red – the billowing black folds of the raven banner floating above them as their whistling swords hewed down men like wheat before the reaper.

Free of the press the kern ran swiftly along the battle-line until he came to the higher ground of Cabra where the Meathmen thronged, tense and trembling like hunting dogs as they gripped their weapons and looked eagerly at their king. Malachi stood apart, watching the fray with moody eyes, his lion-like head bowed, his fingers twined in his golden beard.

“King Melaghlin,” said Conn bluntly, “my prince, Murrogh, urges you to charge home, for the press grows great and the men of the Gael are hard beset.”

The great O’Neill lifted his head and stared absently at the kern. Conn little guessed the chaotic struggle which was taking place in Malachi’s soul

– the red visions which thronged his brain – riches, power, the rule of all Ireland, balanced against the black shame of treachery. He gazed out across the field where the banner of his nephew O'Kelly heaved among the spears. And Malachi shuddered with a sudden sickness, but shook his head.

"Nay," said he, "it is not time – I will charge – when the time comes."

For an instant king and kern looked into each others' eyes and the eyes of Malachi dropped. And Conn turned without a word and sped down the slope. And as he went he saw that the advance of Lennox and the men of Desmond had been checked. Mailmora, raging like a wild man, had cut down Prince Meathla O'Faelan with his own hand, a chance spear thrust had wounded the Great Steward, and now the Leinstermen held fast against the onset of the Munster and Scottish clans. But where the chiefs of the Dalcassians fought, the battle was at a locked stand-still; like a jutting cliff that breaks the sea, the prince of Thomond broke the advance of the Norsemen.

In the titanic upheaval of slaughter, Conn came again to Murrogh and said: "Melaghlin says he will charge when the time comes."

"Hell to his soul," snarled Black Turlogh. "We are betrayed!"

Murrogh's blue eyes flamed.

"Then in the name of God," he roared like a west wind, "*let us charge and die!*"

The gasping struggling bloody men heard his shout and were electrified. The blind passion of the Gael surged up in their souls bred of desperate despair; the lines stiffened like iron and a great yell shook the field that made King Sitric, on his castle wall, whiten and grip the parapet. He had heard that yell before.

And now as Murrogh leaped forward, shouting, the strange, slumbering soul of the Gael woke to red fury, as it wakes in men who have no hope. Like inspired madmen the Gaels hurled their last charge, and like a blast from Hell they smote the shield-wall which reeled to the blow.

And now no human power could stay the onslaught of Murrogh and his chiefs, fired to superhuman fury by desperation and battle-madness. They no longer hoped to live or even to win, but only to glut their fury as they died, and in their despair they were like wounded tigers. As a storm smites the fleets, Murrogh smote the close-locked ranks and his double strokes hacked a bloody way, cleaving iron and bone alike; severing limbs, splitting skulls, cleaving breasts and shoulder-bones. Close at his heels flamed the

axe of Black Turlogh, the swords of Dunlang, young Turlogh and Conn; under that torrent of steel the iron line crumpled and gave and through the breach the frenzied Gaels ploughed hacking. The shield-wall formation melted away.

And at this moment the wild men of Connacht who still lived again hurled a desperate charge against the Dublin Danes. O'Hyne and Dubhgall fell together and the Dublin men were battered backward, disputing every foot.

And now the whole field melted into a mingled mass of men without rank or formation. Among the serried press Murrogh came at last upon Jarl Sigurd who stood among a torn heap of Dalcassian dead.

Behind the Jarl stood grim old Rane Asgrimm's son, holding the raven banner, and Murrogh rushed upon him and slew him with a single stroke. Sigurd turned and his sword rent Murrogh's tunic and gashed his chest, but the Gaelic prince smote so fiercely on the Norseman's shield, Jarl Sigurd reeled. For an instant he could but defend himself against the rain of blows Murrogh showered with either hand upon him, and only the strength of his helmet saved him.

Thorleif Hordi had picked up the banner but scarce had he lifted it when Black Turlogh, eyes glaring, broke through and split his skull to the teeth. Sigurd, seeing his banner fall once more, struck Murrogh with such desperate power that his sword bit through the prince's steel cap and gashed the scalp. Blood jetted down Murrogh's face and he reeled, but before Sigurd could strike again, Black Turlogh's axe licked out like a flash of lightning. The Jarl's warding shield fell shattered from his arm, and Sigurd gave back for an instant, daunted by the whistling play of that deathly axe. And a rush of kerns and Vikings alike swept the chiefs apart.

"Thorstein!" shouted Sigurd. "Take up the banner!"

"Touch it not," exclaimed Asmund. "It is cursed; who bears it, dies!"

And even as he spoke, Dunlang's sword crushed his skull.

"Hrafn!" exclaimed Sigurd desperately. "Bear thou the banner!"

"Bear your own curse!" answered Hrafn with a wild laugh, hewing desperately right and left. "This is the end of us all!"

"Cowards!" roared the Jarl, snatching up the banner himself and striving to gather it under his cloak as Murrogh, face bloody and eyes blazing, rushed at him through the press. Sigurd flung up his sword but it was too late. The sword in Murrogh's right hand splintered on his helmet, bursting

the straps that held it and ripping it from his head, and Murrogh's left-hand sword, whistling in behind the first blow, shattered the Jarl's skull and felled him dead in the bloody folds of his banner which wrapped about him as he fell.

Now a great roar went up and the Gaels redoubled their strokes. With the shield-wall formation torn apart, the mail of the armored Vikings could not save them for the Dalcassian axes, flashing like summer-lightning, hewed through chain-mesh and iron plates alike, rending linden-wood shield and horned helmet. Yet though the Danes were hurled backward in a struggling chaotic mass by repeated charges, they did not break.

But on the high ramparts King Sitric had turned deathly pale; he crouched, gripping the parapet with hands that trembled. For he knew that these wild men could not be beaten now, who spilled their lives like water, hurling their naked bodies again and again into the fangs of spear and axe. Kormlada was white and silent, but Sitric's wife, King Brian's daughter, cried out in sudden joy, for her heart was with her own people.

Murrogh was striving to reach Broder, but the black Viking had seen Sigurd die and he was not eager to face the maddened prince. Broder's world was crumbling under his feet. Even his vaunted mail was failing him, for though it had thus far saved his skin, it hung on him in tatters. Never before had the Manx Viking faced the dread Dalcassian axe. He drew back from Murrogh's onset, not from any cowardice, but as a man might avoid a charging lion.

And in the thickest of the press an axe shattered on Murrogh's helmet, knocking him to his knees and blinding him momentarily with the terrific impact. Dunlang O'Hartigan stood above him and his sword wove a wheel of death above the writhing prince.

Murrogh reeled up calling: “Dunlang! Where are you? I hear the thunder of your blows, but I cannot see you!”

The press slackened as Black Turlogh, Conn and young Turlogh drove in hacking and stabbing, and Dunlang, frenzied by the heat of battle, tore off his helmet and flung it aside, ripping off his cuirass.

“The Devil eat such cages!” he roared, catching at the reeling prince to support him, and even at that instant Thorstein the Dane ran in and drove his spear deep into Dunlang’s side. The young Dalcassian staggered and fell at Murrogh’s feet, and Conn roared and with a lion-like leap, struck

Thorstein’s head from his shoulders so that it whirled grinning through the air in a shower of crimson.

Murrogh shook the blood and darkness from his eyes. “Dunlang!” he cried in a fearful voice, falling to his knees at the side of his friend and raising his head; but Dunlang’s eyes were already glazing.

“Murrogh! Eevin!” he whispered, then blood gushed from his lips and he went limp in the prince’s arms. Murrogh leaped up with a scream like a madman. Roaring he rushed into the thick of the Vikings and his men swept in like a storm behind him. Slashing right and left he mowed down the ranks, and on the hill of Cabra, Malachi cried out suddenly, flinging doubts and plots to the wind. As Broder had plotted, so had he. He had but to stand aside until both hosts were cut to pieces, then he could seize Ireland, tricking the Danes as they had planned to betray him. But the blood in his veins cried out against him and would not be stilled. He gripped the collar about his neck – the golden collar of Tomar, that he had taken so many years before from the Danish king his sword had broken, and the old fire leaped up anew.

“Charge and die!” he roared, drawing his sword, and at his back the men of Meath yelled like a hunting pack and swarmed down into the field.

Under the shock of those fresh new hordes the weakened Danes staggered and broke, and tore away singly and in slashing desperate clumps, seeking to gain the bay where their ships were anchored. But the Meathmen had cut off their retreat. And the ships lay far out, for the tide was at flood. All day that terrific battle had raged, yet to Conn, snatching, between mighty blows, a startled glance at the sinking sun, it seemed that scarce an hour had passed since the lines crashed.

The fleeing Northmen made for the river and the Gaels plunged in after them to drag them down. Among the fugitives and the clumps of Norsemen who here and there made determined stands, the Irish chiefs were divided. The boy Turlogh was separated from Murrogh’s side and no man saw him again until they dragged his drowned body from the fishing weir of the Tolka, his fingers tangled in a Dane’s shaggy hair.

The clans of Leinster, first to flinch in the early battle, now were the last to break. Their king had worked them into the semblance of a formation, and they were fighting like fiends, when Black Turlogh rushed like a blood-mad tiger into the thick of them and struck Mailmora dead in the midst of

his warriors. And the Gaels of Leinster broke under the charge of their maddened kinsmen.

The flight became general and Murrogh, still blood-mad but staggering from fatigue and loss of blood, came upon a band of Vikings who, back to back, resisted the conquerors. Their leader was Anrad the berserk and when he saw Murrogh he rushed upon him furiously. Murrogh, too weary to parry the Dane's stroke, dropped his own sword and closed with Anrad, hurling him to the ground. The sword was wrenched from the Dane's hand as they fell and both snatched at it, but Murrogh caught the hilt and Anrad the blade. The Gaelic prince tore it away, dragging the keen edge through the Viking's hand, severing nerve and thew, and setting a knee on Anrad's chest, Murrogh drove the sword thrice through his body. And Anrad, dying, drew a dagger with his left hand and plunged it under Murrogh's heart. So from the dead man, Murrogh fell back dying.

The Danes were all flying now, and in the river that seethed and foamed crimson, the work of slaughter went on. There Dane and Gael, close-locked, tore out each other's throats and entrails, and sank unheeding. On the high wall King Sitric stared stunned and bewildered, watching his high ambitions crumble and fade away – and Kormlada gazed wild-eyed into ruin, defeat, shame.

Conn ran among the dying and the fugitives, seeking Thorwald Raven. The kern's buckler was gone, shattered among the axes. His broad breast was gashed in half a dozen places; a sword-edge had bitten into his scalp when only his shock of tangled hair had saved his brain. A spear had girded deep into his thigh. Yet now in the heat and fury he scarce felt these wounds.

Suddenly he stumbled over a prostrate form where dead men in wolf-skins lay thick among a heap of mailed corpses. A weakening hand caught at his knee and Conn bent down to the chief of Hy Many – O'Kelly, nephew of Malachi. The chief's eyes were glazed and he murmured in delirium.

"Tell my uncle, King Malachi, that not for all the gold he has offered me, will I betray King Brian – yet I will keep his secret – "

Conn lifted his head and sanity came back into the dying eyes and a smile curled the blue lips.

"I hear the war-cry of the O'Neill!" he whispered. "Malachi could not be a traitor! He could not stand from the fray, despite his ambitions! The Red –

Hand – the Red Hand – to – Victory! – ”

And so died O’Kelly, prince of Connacht, as blameless a knight as ever walked the red ways of battle.

Conn rose suddenly, his eyes blazing, as a familiar figure met his gaze. Thorwald Raven had broken from the press and now he fled alone and swiftly, not toward the sea or the river, where his comrades were dying like flies beneath the axes of the avengers, but toward Tomar’s Wood. And on the swift feet of hate, Conn followed.

Thorwald saw his fate and turned snarling; so the thrall met his former master and red was the tryst. As Conn rushed into close quarters, the Norseman gripped his spear shaft with both hands and lunged fiercely, but the point glanced from the great copper collar about the kern’s neck. And Conn lunged upward with all his tigerish power, so that the great blade ripped through Jarl Thorwald’s tattered mail and spilled his entrails on the sand.

Conn turned about and realized that the chase had brought him almost to the tent of the king, pitched behind the battle-lines. He saw King Brian standing in front of the tent, his white elf-locks flowing in the wind, and but one man attending him. Swearing, Conn ran forward.

“Kern,” said the king, “what are the tidings?”

“The foreigners flee, as thou seest,” said Conn. “But Murrogh has fallen.”

“Evil are those tidings,” said Brian, his age falling suddenly on him like a cold cloud. “Erin shall never again look on a champion like him.”

“But where are your guards, my lord?” exclaimed Conn.

“They have joined in the pursuit,” Brian answered and Conn said: “Come, my lord, let me take you to a safer spot; the Gall are flying all about us here.”

King Brian shook his head like a man whose doom is upon him.

“Nay, I know I leave not this place alive, for Eevin of Craglea told me last night that I should fall this day. And what avails me to survive Murrogh and the champions of the Gael? Let me lie at Armagh, in the peace of God.”

And now the attendant cried out: “My king, we are undone! Men blue and naked are upon us!”

“The armored Danes!” snarled Conn, wheeling about as King Brian drew his heavy sword. And they saw a group of blood-stained Vikings approaching the tent. Before them strode Broder and Prince Amlaff, their

vaunted mail hanging in shreds, their swords notched and dripping. It was not chance that brought Broder to the king's tent. He had marked its location and now he came through the ruins of the flying fight, his soul a raging Hell of shame and fury in which the forms of Brian, Sigurd and Kormlada spun in a devil's dance. He had lost the battle, lost Ireland, lost Kormlada; now he was ready to give up his life in a last dying effort of vengeance.

And Broder yelled like a wolf and rushed upon the king, with Prince Amlaff, and Conn sprang to bar their way like a fierce grizzly at bay. But Broder swerved aside and avoided the kern, leaving him to Amlaff, as he rushed on the king. And Conn took Amlaff's blade in his arm and smote a single terrible blow that rent the prince's hauberk like paper, severed the shoulder bone and shattered the spine, then he sprang back to guard King Brian.

But the red drama was already played. Even as he turned, Conn saw Broder parry Brian's stroke and drive his sword through the ancient king's breast. Brian went down, but even as he fell, he caught himself on one knee and struck as a dying lion strikes. The keen blade shore through flesh and bone, cutting both Broder's legs from under him, and the Viking's scream of triumph broke in a ghastly groan as he toppled in a widening pool of crimson where he struggled convulsively and lay still.

Conn looked about dazedly. Men were coming to Brian's tent; the sound of the keening for the heroes already rose, mingling with the screams and shouts that still rose from the struggling hordes along the river. They were bringing Murrogh's body to the king's tent; slowly they walked, weary, bloody men with bowed heads. Behind the litter that bore the prince's corpse came others – the body of Turlogh, Murrogh's son – of Donald, Steward of Mar – of O'Kelly and O'Hyne, the western chiefs – of prince Meathla O'Faelan – of Dunlang O'Hartigan. Beside that litter walked Eevin of Craglea, her dark head sunk on her breast. She did not cry out, she did not weep. She walked as one in a trance. The bloody litters were set down and the warriors gathered silently and wearily about the corpse of their great king. They gazed unspeaking, their brains still so weary and dull and frozen from the agony of strife that they hardly knew what they saw or did. Eevin of Craglea lay motionless beside the body of her lover, as if she herself were dead; no cry or moan escaped her pallid lips.

The clamor of battle was dying as the setting sun bathed the trampled field in a bloody light. The fugitives, tattered and slashed, were limping into the gates of Dublin, and the warriors of King Sitric were preparing to stand siege. But the Irish were in no condition to besiege the city. Four thousand warriors and chiefs had fallen, and nearly all the champions of the Gael. But more than seven thousand Danes and Leinstermen lay stretched on the blood-soaked earth, and the power of the Vikings was broken forever. No more would their swarming fleets sweep down to crush whole kingdoms beneath their iron heels. The dying sun sank in an ocean of dark blood, like a symbol of the passing of the Viking.

Conn walked toward the river, slowly, feeling now the ache of his stiffening wounds, and he met Turlogh Dubh. The battle-madness was gone from Black Turlogh and his dark face was inscrutable. From head to foot he was stained with crimson.

“My lord,” said Conn, fingering the great copper ring about his neck, “I have slain the man who put this thrall-mark on me, and I would be free of it.”

Black Turlogh took his axe-head in his hands and pressing it against the ring, drove the keen edge through the soft metal. The axe gashed Conn’s shoulder, but neither of them heeded it.

“You who were a thrall are a free man,” said Turlogh Dubh. “And you have a tale to tell your grandsons in the days to come, for the hordes of the sea have fallen before the swords of the South. And such a battle as we have fought this day, the tribes of men will see never again. The days of the twilight come on amain and a strange feeling is upon me as of a waning age. The king has fallen and all his heroes and though we have freed the land of the foreign chains, we too are as but ghosts waning into the night.”

“I know not,” said Conn, flexing his mighty arms. “I am but a kern and the wisdom of chiefs is not for me – but this day I have seen kings fall like ripe grain and have fought at the side of heroes, and surely man need ask no better fate than this.”

* “They (the Irish) go to battle without armor, considering it a burden, and deeming it brave and honorable to fight without it.” *Giraldus Cambrensis*

Hawks Over Egypt

I

The tall figure in the white *khalat* wheeled, cursing softly, hand at scimitar hilt. Not lightly men walked the nighted streets of Cairo in the troublous days of the year 1021 A.D. In this dark, winding alley of the unsavory river quarter of el Maks, anything might happen.

"Why do you follow me, dog?" The voice was harsh, edged with a Turkish accent.

Another tall figure emerged from the shadows, clad, like the first, in a *khalat* of white silk, but lacking the other's spired helmet.

"I do not follow you!" The voice was not so guttural as the Turk's, and the accent was different. "Can not a stranger walk the streets without being subjected to insult by every reeling drunkard of the gutter?"

The stormy anger in his voice was not feigned, any more than was the suspicion in the voice of the other. They glared at each other, each gripping his hilt with a hand tense with passion.

"I have been followed since nightfall," accused the Turk. "I have heard stealthy footsteps along the dark alleys. Now you come unexpectedly into view, in a place most suited for murder!"

"Allah confound you!" swore the other wrathfully. "Why should I follow you? I have lost my way in the streets. I never saw you before, as I hope never to see you again. I am Yusuf ibn Suleyman of Cordova, but recently come to Egypt – you Turkish dog!" he added, as if impelled by overflowing spleen.

"I thought your accent betokened the Moor," quoth the Turk. "No matter. An Andalusian sword can be bought as easily as a Cairene's, and – "

"By the beard of Ali!" exclaimed the Moor in a gust of ungovernable passion, tearing out his saber; then a stealthy pad of feet brought him round, springing back and wheeling to keep both the Turk and the newcomers before him. But the Turk had drawn his own scimitar, and was glaring past him.

Three huge figures loomed menacingly in the shadows, the dim starlight glinting on broad curved blades. There was a glimmer, too, of white teeth, and rolling white eyeballs.

For an instant there was tense stillness; then one muttered in the thick gutturals of the Sudan: "Which is the dog? Here be two clad alike and the

darkness makes them twins.”

“Cut them both down,” replied another, who towered half a head above his tall companions. “We must make no mistake, nor leave any witness.”

And so saying the three negroes came on in deadly silence, the giant advancing on the Moor, the other two on the Turk.

Yusuf ibn Suleyman did not await the attack. With a snarling oath, he ran at the approaching colossus and slashed furiously at his head. The black man caught the stroke on his uplifted blade, and grunted beneath the impact. But the next instant, with a crafty twist and wrench, he had locked the Moor’s blade under his guard and torn the weapon from his opponent’s hand, to fall ringing on the stones. A searing curse ripped from Yusuf’s lips. He had not expected to encounter such a combination of skill and brute strength.

But fired to fighting madness, he did not hesitate. Even as the giant swept the broad scimitar aloft, the Moor sprang in under his lifted arm, shouting a wild war-cry, and drove his poniard to the hilt in the negro’s broad breast. Blood spurted along Yusuf’s wrist, and the scimitar fell waveringly, to cut through his silk *kafiyeh* and glance from the steel cap beneath. The giant sank dying to the ground.

Yusuf ibn Suleyman caught up his saber and looked about to locate his late antagonist.

The Turk had met the attack of the two negroes coolly, retreating slowly to keep them in front of him, and suddenly slashed one across the breast and shoulder, so that he dropped his sword and fell to his knees with a moan. But even as he fell, he gripped his slayer’s knees and hung on like a brainless leech, without mind or reason. The Turk kicked and struggled in vain; those black arms, bulging with iron muscles, held him motionless, while the remaining black redoubled the fury of his strokes. The Turk could neither advance nor retreat, nor could he spare the single lightning flicker of his blade that would have rid him of his incubus.

Even as the black swordsman drew breath for a stroke that the cumbered Turk could not have parried, he heard the swift rush of feet behind him, cast a wild glance over his shoulder, and saw the Moor close upon him, eyes blazing, lips asnarl in the starlight. Before the negro could turn, the Moorish saber drove through him with such fury that the blade sprang its full length out of his breast, while the hilt smote him fiercely between the shoulders; life went out of him with an inarticulate cry.

The Turk caved in the shaven skull of the other negro with his scimitar hilt, and shaking himself free of the corpse, turned to the Moor who was twisting his saber out of the twitching body it transfixed.

“Why did you come to my aid?” inquired the Turk. Yusuf ibn Suleyman shrugged his broad shoulders at the unnecessary quality of the question.

“We were two men beset by rogues,” quoth he. “Fate made us allies. Now if you wish, we will take up anew our quarrel. You said I spied upon you.”

“And I see my mistake and crave your pardon,” answered the other promptly. “I know now who has been skulking after me down the dark alleys.”

Sheathing his scimitar, he bent over each corpse in turn, peering intently at the bloody features. When he reached the body of the giant slain by the Moor’s poniard, he paused longer, and presently murmured softly, as if to himself: “Soho! Zaman the Sworder! Of high rank the archer whose shaft is panelled with pearls!” And wrenching from the limp black finger a heavy, curiously bezelled ring, he slipped it into his girdle, and then laid hold on the garments of the dead man.

“Aid me, brother,” said he. “Let us dispose of this carrion, so that no questions will be asked.”

Without question Yusuf ibn Suleyman grasped a blood-stained jacket in each hand, and dragged the bodies after the Turk down a reeking black alley, in the midst of which rose the broken curb of a ruined and forgotten well. The corpses plunged headfirst into the abyss, and struck far below with a sullen splash; and with a light laugh, the Turk turned to the Moor.

“Allah hath made us allies,” he repeated. “I owe you a debt.”

“You owe me naught,” answered the Moor in a rather surly tone.

“Words can not level a mountain,” returned the Turk imperturbably. “I am Al Afdhal, a Memluk. Come with me out of these rat dens, and we will converse.”

Yusuf ibn Suleyman sheathed his saber somewhat grudgingly, as if he rather regretted the decision of the Turk toward peace; but he followed the latter without comment. Their way led through the rat-haunted gloom of reeking alleys, and across narrow winding streets, noisome with refuse. Cairo was then, as later, a fantastic contrast of splendor and decay, where exotic palaces rose among the smoke-stained ruins of forgotten cities; a

swarm of motley suburbs clustering about the walls of El Kahira, the forbidden inner city where dwelt the caliph and his nobles.

Presently the companions came to a newer and more respectable quarter, where the overhanging balconies with their richly latticed windows of cedar and nacre inlay almost touched one another across the narrow street.

“All the shops are dark,” grunted the Moor. “A few days ago the city was lighted like day, from dusk to sunrise.”

“That was one of Al Hakim’s whims,” said the Turk. “Now he has another whim, and no lights burn in the streets of *al medina*. What his mood will be tomorrow, only Allah knows.”

“There is no knowledge, save in Allah,” agreed the Moor piously, and scowled. The Turk had tugged at his thin drooping moustache as if to hide a grin.

They halted before an iron-bound door in a heavy stone arch, and the Turk rapped cautiously. A voice challenged from within, and was answered in the gutturals of Turan, unintelligible to Yusuf ibn Suleyman. The door was opened, and Al Afdhal pushed into thick darkness, drawing the Moor with him. They heard the door closed behind them, then a heavy leather curtain was pulled back, revealing a lamp-lit corridor, and a scarred ancient whose fierce moustachios proclaimed the Turk.

“An old Memluk turned to wine-selling,” said Al Afdhal to the Moor. “Lead us to a chamber where we can be alone, Ahmed.”

“All the chambers are empty,” grumbled old Ahmed, limping before them. “I am a ruined man. Men fear to touch the cup, since the caliph banned wine. Allah smite him with the gout!”

Bowing them into a small chamber he spread mats for them, set before them a great dish of pistachio kernels, Tihamah raisins, and citrons, poured wine from a bulging skin, and limped away, muttering under his breath.

“Egypt has come upon evil days,” drawled the Turk lazily, quaffing deep of the Shiraz liquor. He was a tall man, leanly but strongly built, with keen black eyes that danced restlessly and were never still. His *khalat* was plain, but of costly fabric; his spired helmet was chased with silver, and jewels glinted in the hilt of his scimitar.

Over against him Yusuf ibn Suleyman presented something of the same hawk-like appearance, which is characteristic of all men who live by war. The Moor was fully as tall as the Turk, but with thicker limbs and a greater depth of chest. His was the build of the mountaineer – strength combined

with endurance. Under his white *kafiyeh* his brown face showed smooth shaven, and he was lighter in complection than the Turk, the darkness of his features being more of the sun than of nature. His grey eyes in repose were cold as chilled steel, but even so there smoldered in them a hint of stormy fires.

He gulped his wine and smacked his lips in appreciation, and the Turk grinned and refilled his goblet.

"How fare the Faithful in Spain, brother?"

"Badly enough, since the Vizir Mozaffar ibn Al Mansur died," answered the Moor. "The Caliph Hischam is a weakling. He can not curb his nobles, each of whom would set up an independent state. The land groans under civil war, and yearly the Christian kingdoms wax mightier. A strong hand could yet save Andalusia; but in all Spain there is no such strong hand."

"In Egypt such a hand might be found," remarked the Turk. "Here are many powerful emirs who love brave men. In the ranks of the Memluks there is always a place for a saber like yours."

"I am neither Turk nor slave," grunted Yusuf.

"No!" Al Afdhal's voice was soft; the hint of a smile touched his thin lips. "Do not fear; I am in your debt, and I can keep a secret."

"What do you mean?" The Moor's hawk-like head came up with a jerk. His grey eyes began to smolder. His sinewy hand sought his hilt.

"I heard you cry out in the stress of the fight as you smote the black sworder," said Al Afdhal. "You roared '*Santiago!*' So shout the Caphars of Spain in battle. You are no Moor; you are a Christian!"

The other was on his feet in an instant, saber drawn. But Al Afdhal had not stirred; he reclined at ease on the cushions, sipping his wine.

"Fear not," he repeated. "I have said that I would keep your secret. I owe you my life. A man like you could never be a spy; you are too quick to anger, too open in your wrath. There can be but one reason why you come among the Moslems – to avenge yourself upon a private enemy."

The Christian stood motionless for a moment, feet braced as if for an attack, the sleeve of his *khalat* falling back to reveal the ridged muscles of his thick brown arm. He scowled uncertainly, and standing thus, looked much less like a Moslem than he had previously looked.

There was an instant of breathless tension, then with a shrug of his brawny shoulders, the false Moor reseated himself, though with his saber across his knees.

“Very well,” he said candidly, tearing off a great bunch of grapes with a bronzed hand and cramming them into his mouth. He spoke between mastication. “I am Diego de Guzman, of Castile. I seek an enemy in Egypt.”

“Whom?” inquired Al Afdhal with interest.

“A Berber named Zahir el Ghazi, may the dogs gnaw his bones!”

The Turk started.

“By Allah, you aim at a lofty target! Know you that this man is now an emir of Egypt, and general of all the Berber troops of the Fatimid caliphs?”

“By Saint Pedro,” answered the Spaniard, “it matters as little as if he were a street-sweeper.”

“Your blood-feud has led you far,” commented Al Afdhal.

“The Berbers of Malaga revolted against their Arab governor,” said de Guzman abruptly. “They asked aid of Castile. Five hundred knights marched to their assistance. Before we could reach Malaga, this accursed Zahir el Ghazi had betrayed his companions into the hands of the caliph. Then he betrayed us, who were marching to their aid. Ignorant of all that had passed, we fell into a trap laid by the Moors. Only I escaped with my life. Three brothers and an uncle fell beside me on that day. I was cast into a Moorish prison, and a year passed before my people were able to raise enough gold to ransom me.

“When I was free again, I learned that Zahir had fled from Spain, for fear of his own people. But my sword was needed in Castile. It was another year before I could take the road of vengeance. And for a year I have sought through the Moslem countries, in the guise of a Moor, whose speech and customs I have learned through a lifetime of battle against them, and by reason of my captivity among them. Only recently I learned that the man I sought was in Egypt.”

Al Afdhal did not at once reply, but sat scanning the rugged features of the man before him, seeing reflected in them the untamable nature of the wild uplands where a handful of Christian warriors had defied the swords of Islam for three hundred years.

“How long have you been in *al medina*?” he demanded abruptly.

“Only a few days,” grunted de Guzman. “Long enough to learn that the caliph is mad.”

“There is more to learn,” returned Al Afdhal. “Al Hakim is, indeed, mad. I say to a *Feringhi* what I dare not say to a Moslem – yet all men know it.

The people, who are Sunnites, murmur under his heel. Three bodies of troops uphold his power. First, the Berbers from Kairouan, where this Shia dynasty of the Fatimids first took root; secondly, the black Sudani, who, under their general Othman yearly gain more power; and thirdly, the Memluks, or Baharites, the White Slaves of the River – Turks and Sunnites, like myself. Their emir is Es Salih Muhammad, and between him, and el Ghazi, and the black Othman, there is enough hate and jealousy to start a dozen wars.

"Zahir el Ghazi came to Egypt three years ago as a penniless adventurer. He has risen to emir, partly by virtue of a Venetian slave woman named Zaida. There is a woman behind the curtain of the caliph, too: the Arab Zulaikha. But no woman can play with Al Hakim."

Diego set down his empty goblet and looked straight at Al Afdhal. Spaniards had not yet acquired the polished formality men later came to consider their dominant characteristic. The Castilian was still more Nordic than Latin. Diego de Guzman possessed the open bluntness of the Goths who were his ancestors.

"Well, what now?" he demanded. "Are you going to betray me to the Moslems, or did you speak truth when you said you would keep my secret?"

"I have no love for Zahir el Ghazi," mused Al Afdhal, as if to himself, turning in his fingers the ring he had taken from the black giant. "Zaman was Othman's dog; but Berber gold can buy a Sudani sword." Lifting his head he returned de Guzman's direct and challenging stare.

"I too owe Zahir a debt," he said. "I will do more than keep your secret. I will aid you in your vengeance!"

De Guzman started forward and his iron fingers gripped the Turk's silk-clad shoulder like a vise.

"Do you speak truth?"

"Let Allah smite me if I lie!" swore the Turk. "Listen, while I unfold my plan – "

II

And while in the hidden wine-shop of Ahmed the Crippled a Turk and a Spaniard bent their heads together over a darksome plot, within the massive walls of El Kahira a stupendous event was coming to pass. Under the shadows of the *meshrebiyas* stole a veiled and hooded figure. For the first time in seven years, a woman was walking the streets of Cairo.

Realizing her enormity, she trembled with fear that was not inspired wholly by the lurking shadows which might mask skulking thieves. The stones hurt her feet in her tattered velvet slippers; for seven years the cobblers of Cairo had been forbidden to make street shoes for women. Al Hakim had decreed that the women of Egypt be shut up, not indeed like jewels in vaults, but like reptiles in cages.

Though clad in cast-off rags, it was no common woman who stole shuddering through the night. On the morrow the word would run through the mysterious channels of communication from *harim* to *harim*, and spiteful women lolling on satin cushions would laugh gleefully at the shame of an envied and hated sister.

Zaida, the red-haired Venetian, favorite of Zahir el Ghazi, had wielded more power than any other woman in Egypt. And now, as she stole through the night, an outcast, the thought that burned her like a white hot brand was the realization that she had aided her faithless lover and master in his climb to the high places of the world, only for another woman to enjoy the fruits of that toil.

Zaida came of a race of women accustomed to swaying thrones with their beauty and wit. She scarcely remembered the Venice from which she had been stolen as a child by Barbary pirates. The corsair who had taken her and raised her for his *harim* had fallen in battle with the Byzantines, and as a supple girl of fourteen, Zaida had passed into the hands of a prince of Crete, a languorous, effeminate youth, whom she came to twist about her pink fingers. Then, after some years, had come the raid of the Egyptian fleet on the islands of the Greeks, plunder, slaughter, fire, crashing walls and shrieks of death, a red-haired girl screaming in the iron arms of a laughing Berber giant.

Because she came of a race whose women were rulers of men, Zaida neither perished nor became a whimpering toy. Her nature was supple as the

sapling which bends to the wind and is not uprooted. The time was not long when, if she never mastered Zahir el Ghazi in turn, she at least stood on equal footing with him, and because she came of a race of king-makers, she set forth to make a king of Zahir el Ghazi. The man had intelligence, super vitality, and strength of mind and body; he needed but one stimulant to his ambition. Zaida was that incentive.

And now Zahir, considering himself fully able to climb the shining rungs of the ladder without her, had cast her aside. Because Allah gave him a lust no one woman, however desirable, could wholly satisfy, and because Zaida would endure no rival – a supple Arab had smiled at the Berber, and the red-haired Venetian's world had crashed. Zahir had stripped her and driven her into the street like a common slut, only the compassion of a slave covering her nakedness.

Engrossed in her searing thoughts, she looked up with a start as a tall hooded figure stepped from the shadows of an overhanging balcony and confronted her. A wide cloak was drawn close around him, his coif concealed the lower parts of his features. Only his eyes burned at her, almost luminous in the starlight. She cowered back with a low cry.

"A woman on the streets of *al medina*!" The voice was strange, hollow, almost ghostly. "Is this not in defiance of the command of the caliph, on whom be peace?"

"I walk not the streets by choice, *ya khawand*," she answered. "My master has cast me forth, and I have not where to lay my head."

The stranger bent his hooded head and stood statue-like for a space, like a brooding image of night and silence. Zaida watched him nervously. There was something gloomy and portentous about him; he seemed less like a man pondering over the tale of a chance-met slave-girl, than a sombre prophet weighing the doom of a sinful people.

At last he lifted his head.

"Come!" said he, in a voice of command rather than invitation. "I will find a place for you." And without pausing to see if she obeyed, he stalked away up the street. She hurried after him, clutching her draggled robe about her. She could not walk the streets all night; any officer of the caliph would strike off her head for violating the edict of Al Hakim. This stranger might be leading her into slavery, but she had no choice.

The silence of her companion made her nervous. Several times she essayed speech, but his grim unresponsiveness struck her silent in turn. Her

curiosity was piqued, her vanity touched. Never before had she failed so signally to interest a man. Faintly she sensed an imponderable something she could not overcome – an unnatural and frightening aloofness she could not touch. Fear began to grow on her, but she followed because she knew not what else to do. Only once he spoke, when, looking back, she was startled to see several furtive and shadowy forms stealing after them.

"Men follow us!" she exclaimed.

"Heed them not," he answered in his weird voice. "They are but servants of Allah that serve Him in their way."

This cryptic answer set her shuddering, and nothing further was said until they reached a small arched gate set in a lofty wall. There the stranger halted and called aloud. He was answered from within, and the gate opened, revealing a black mute holding a torch on high. In its lurid gleam the height of the robed stranger was inhumanly exaggerated.

"But this – this is a gate of the Great Palace!" stammered Zaida.

For answer the man threw back his hood, revealing a long pale oval of a face, in which burned those strange luminous eyes.

Zaida screamed and fell to her knees. *"Al Hakim!"*

"Aye, Al Hakim, oh faithless and sinful one!" The hollow voice was like a knell. Sonorous and inexorable as the brazen trumpets of doom it rolled out in the night. "Oh, vain and foolish woman, who dare ignore the command of Al Hakim, which is the word of God! Who treads the street in sin, and sets aside the mandates of The Beneficent King! There is no majesty, and there is no might save in Allah, the glorious, the great! Oh, Lord of the Three Worlds, why withhold Thy levin-fire to burn her into a charred and blackened brand for all men to behold and shudder thereat!"

Then changing his tone suddenly, he cried sharply: "Seize her!" and the dogging shadows closed in, revealing themselves as black men with the wizened features of mutes. As their fingers closed on her flesh, Zaida fainted for the first and last time in her life.

She did not feel herself being lifted and carried through the gate, across gardens waving with blossoms and reeking with spice, through corridors lined with spiral columns of alabaster and gold, and into a chamber without windows, the arched doors of which were bolted with bars of gold, gemmed with amethysts.

It was upon the carpeted, cushion strewn floor of this chamber that the Venetian regained consciousness. She looked dazedly about her, then the

memory of her adventure came back with a rush, and with a low cry, she stared wildly about for her captor. She shrank down again to see him standing above her, arms folded, head bent gloomily, while his terrible eyes burned into her soul.

“Oh Lion of the Faithful!” she gasped, struggling to her knees. “Mercy! Mercy!”

Even as she spoke she was sickeningly aware of the futility of pleading for mercy where mercy was unknown. She was crouching before the most feared monarch in the world: the man whose name was a curse in the mouths of Christian, Jew and orthodox Moslem alike; the man who, claiming descent from Ali, the nephew of the Prophet, was the head of the Shia world, the Incarnation of Divine Reason to all Shiites; the man who had ordered all dogs killed, all vines cut down, all grapes and honey dumped into the Nile; who had banned all games of chance, confiscated the property of the Coptic Christians and given the people themselves over to abominable tortures; who believed that to disobey one of his commands, however trivial, was the blackest sin conceivable. He roamed the streets at night in disguise, as Haroun ar Raschid had done before him, and as Baibars did after him, to see that his commands were obeyed.

So Al Hakim stared at her with wide unblinking eyes, and Zaida felt her flesh shrivel and crawl in horror.

“Blasphemer!” he whispered. “Tool of Shaitan! Daughter of all evil! Oh Allah!” he cried suddenly, flinging aloft his wide-sleeved arms. “What punishment shall be devised for this demon? What agony terrible enough, what degradation vile enough to render justice? Allah grant me wisdom!”

Zaida rose upon her knees, snatching off her torn veil. She stretched out her arm, pointing at his face.

“Why do you call on Allah?” she shrieked hysterically. “Call on Al Hakim! *You* are Allah! *Al Hakim is God!*”

He stopped short at her cry; he reeled, catching at his head, crying out incoherently. Then he straightened himself and looked down at her dazedly. Her face was chalk white, her wide eyes staring. To her natural acting ability was added the real and desperate horror of her position. To Al Hakim it seemed that she was dazed and dazzled by a vision of celestial splendor.

“What do you see, woman?” he gasped.

“Allah has revealed Himself to me!” she whispered. “In your face, shining like the morning sun! Nay, I burn, I die in the blaze of thy glory!”

She sank her face in her hands and crouched trembling. Al Hakim passed a trembling hand over his brow and temples.

"*God!*" he whispered. "Aye, I *am* God! I have guessed it – I have dreamed it – I, and I alone possess the wisdom of the Infinite. Now a mortal has seen it, has recognized the god in the form of man. Aye, it is the truth taught by the teachers of the Shia – the Incarnation of the Godhead – I see the Truth behind the truth at last. Not a mere incarnation of divinity – divinity itself! *Allah!* Al Hakim is Allah!"

Bending his gaze upon the woman at his feet, he ordered: "Rise, woman, and look upon thy god!"

Timidly she did so, and stood shrinking before his unwinking gaze. Zaida the Venetian was not extremely beautiful according to certain arbitrary standards which demand the perfectly chiselled features, the delicate frame – but she was good to look at. She was somewhat broadly built, with big breasts and haunches, and shoulders wider than most. Her face was not the classic of the Greeks, and was faintly freckled. But there was about her a vital something transcending mere superficial beauty. Her brown eyes sparkled, reflecting a keen intelligence, and the physical vigor promised by her thick limbs and big hips.

As he looked at her a change clouded the wide eyes of Al Hakim; he seemed to see her clearly for the first time.

"Thy sin is pardoned," he intoned. "Thou wert first to hail thy God. Henceforth thou shalt serve me in honor and splendor."

She prostrated herself, kissing the carpet before his feet, and he clapped his hands. A eunuch entered, bowing low.

"Go quickly to the house of Zahir el Ghazi," said Al Hakim, seeming to look over the head of the servitor, and see him not at all. "Say to him: 'This is the word of Al Hakim, who is God; that on the morrow shall be the beginning of happenings, of the building of ships, and the marshalling of hosts, even as thou hast desired; for God *is* God, and the unbelievers too long have blasphemed against Him!' "

"Hearkening and obeying, master," mumbled the eunuch, bowing to the floor.

"I doubted and feared," said Al Hakim dreamily, gazing far and beyond the confines of reality into some far realm only he could see. "I knew not – as now I know – that Zahir el Ghazi was the tool of Destiny. When he urged

me to world-conquest, I hesitated. But I am God, and to gods all things are possible, yea, all kingdoms and glory!”

III

Glance briefly at the world on that night of portent, 1021 A.D. It was a night in an age of change, an age writhing in the throes of labor in which all that goes to make up the modern world was struggling for birth. It was a world crimson and torn, chaotic and awful, pregnant with imponderable power, yet apparently sinking into stagnation and ruin.

In Egypt a Sunnite population groaned under the heel of a Shiite dynasty – a dynasty shrunken and shrivelled from world empire, but still mighty, reaching from the Euphrates to the Sudan. Between the borders of Egypt and the western sea stretched a vast expanse inhabited by wild tribes nominally under the caliph's sceptre, the same tribes which had in an earlier day crushed the Gothic kingdom of Spain, and which now stirred restlessly in their mountains, needing only a powerful leader to sweep them again in an overwhelming wave against Christendom.

In Spain the divided Moorish provinces gave ground before the hosts of Castile, Leon and Navarre. But these Christian kingdoms, forged of blood and iron though they were, were not numerically powerful enough to have withstood the combined onslaught of Islam. They formed Christendom's western frontier, while Byzantium formed the eastern frontier, as in the days of Omar and the conquering Companions, holding back the horns of the Crescent that else had met in middle Europe to form an inexorable circle. And the Crescent was never dead; it only slept, and even in its slumber throbbed the drums of empire.

Europe, in the grip of feudalism, was weaker internally than on her borders. The nations were already taking shadowy shape, but as yet there was no real national spirit. In France there was neither Charlemagne nor Martel – only starving, plague-harried peasantry, warring fiefs, and a land torn by strife between Capet and Norman duke, overlord and rebellious vassal. And France was typical of Europe.

There were, it is true, strong men in the West: Canute the Dane, ruling Saxon England; Henry of Germany, Emperor of the shadowy Holy Roman Empire. But Canute was almost like the king of another world, in his sea-girt isolation, and the Emperor had his hands full in seeking to weld his rival realms of Germany and Italy, and in beating back the encroaching Slavs.

In Byzantium the glorious reign of Basilius Bulgaroktonos was drawing to a close. Already long shadows were falling from the east across the Golden Horn. Byzantium was still Christendom's mightiest bulwark; but westward from Bokhara were moving the horsemen of the steppes destined swiftly to wrest from the Eastern Empire her last Asiatic possession. The Seljuks, blocked on the south by the glittering Indo-Iranian empire of Mahmud of Ghazni, were riding toward the setting sun, not to be halted until their horses' hoofs splashed the waters of the Mediterranean.

In Bagdad the Persian Buides fought in the streets with the Turkish mercenaries of the weak Abbasside caliph. But Islam was not crushed, but only broken into many parts, like the shards of a shining blade. Active strength lay in Egypt, in Ghazni, in the marauding Seljuks. Potential strength slumbered in Syria, in Irak, in Arabia, in the restless tribes of the Atlas – strength enough to burst the western barriers of Christendom, were the various separate elements united under a strong hand.

Byzantium was still unassailable; but let the Spanish kingdoms fall before a sudden onrush from Africa, and the hordes would gush into Europe almost without opposition. Such was the picture of the age: both East and West divided and inert; in the West was yet unborn that flaming spirit which, seventy-five years later, stormed eastward in the Crusades; in the East neither a Saladin nor a Genghis Khan was apparent. Yet, let such a man appear, and the horns of the revived Crescent might yet complete the circle, not in central Europe, but over the crumbling walls of Constantinople, assailed from north as well as south.

Such was the panorama of the world on that night of doom and portents, when two hooded figures halted in a group of palm trees among the ruins of nighted Cairo.

Before them lay the waters of el Khalij, the canal, and beyond it, rising from its very bank, the great bastioned wall of sun dried brick which encircled El Kahira, separating the royal heart of *al medina* from the rest of the city. Built by the conquering Fatimids half a century before, the inner city was in reality a gigantic fortress, sheltering the caliphs and their servants and certain troops of their mercenaries – forbidden to common men without special permit.

"We could climb the wall," muttered de Guzman.

"And find ourselves no nearer our enemy," answered Al Afdhal, groping in the shadows under the clustering trees. "Here it is!"

Staring over his shoulder, de Guzman saw the Turk fumbling at what appeared to be a shapeless heap of marble. This particular locality was occupied entirely by ruins, inhabited only by bats and lizards.

“An ancient pagan shrine,” said Al Afdhal. “Shunned because of superstition, and long crumbled – but it hides more than a grove of palm-trees shows!”

He lifted away a broad slab, revealing steps leading down into a black gaping aperture; de Guzman frowned suspiciously.

“This,” said Al Afdhal, sensing his doubt, “is the mouth of a tunnel which leads under the wall and up into the house of Zahir el Ghazi, which stands just beyond the wall.”

“Under the canal?” demanded the Spaniard incredulously.

“Aye; once el Ghazi’s house was the pleasure house of the Caliph Khumaraweyh, who slept on an air-cushion which floated on a pool of quick-silver, guarded by lions – yet fell before the avenger’s dagger, in spite of all. He prepared secret exits from all parts of his palaces and pleasure-houses. Before Zahir el Ghazi took the house, it was occupied by his rival, Es Salih Muhammad. The Berber knows nothing of this secret way. I could have used it before, but until tonight I was not sure that I wished to slay him. Come!”

Swords drawn, they groped down a flight of stone steps and advanced along a level tunnel in pitch blackness. De Guzman’s groping fingers told him that the walls, floor and ceiling were composed of huge blocks of stone, probably looted from edifices reared by the Pharaohs. As they advanced, the stones became slippery underfoot, and the air grew dank and damp. Drops of water fell clammily on de Guzman’s neck, and he shivered and swore. They were passing under the canal. A little later this dankness abated somewhat, and shortly thereafter Al Afdhal hissed a warning, and they began to mount another flight of stone stairs.

At the top the Turk halted and fumbled at some bolt or catch. A panel slid aside, and a soft light streamed in from a vaulted and tapestried corridor. De Guzman realized that they had indeed passed under the canal and the great wall, and stood in the forbidden confines of El Kahira, the mysterious and fabulous.

Al Afdhal slipped lithely through the opening, and after de Guzman had followed, closed it behind them. It became one of the inlaid panels of the wall, differing not from the other sandalwood panels. Then the Turk went

swiftly down the corridor, going without hesitation, like a man who knows his way. The Spaniard followed, saber in hand, glancing incessantly to right and left.

They passed through a dark velvet curtain and came full upon an arched doorway of gold-inlaid ebony. A brawny black man, naked but for voluminous silk breeches, who had been dozing on his haunches, started up, swinging a great scimitar. But he did not cry out; his was the bestial face of a mute.

“The clash of steel will rouse the household,” snapped Al Afdhal, avoiding the sweep of the eunuch’s sword. As the black man stumbled from his wasted effort, de Guzman tripped him. He fell sprawling, and the Turk passed his blade through the black body.

“That was quick and silent enough!” laughed Al Afdhal softly. “Now for the real prey!”

Cautiously he tried the door, while the Spaniard crouched at his shoulder, breathing between his teeth, his eyes beginning to burn like those of a hunting cat. The door gave inward and de Guzman sprang past the Turk into the chamber. Al Afdhal followed, and closing the door, set his back to it, laughing at the man who had leaped up from his divan with a startled oath.

“We have run the buck to cover, brother!”

But there was no laughter on the lips of Diego de Guzman, as he stood over the half-risen occupant of the chamber, and Al Afdhal saw the lifted saber quiver in his muscular hand.

Zahir el Ghazi was a tall, lusty man, his sandy hair close cropped, his short tawny beard carefully trimmed. Late as the hour was, he was fully clad in bag-trousers of silk, girdle and velvet vest.

“Lift not your voice, dog,” advised the Spaniard. “My sword is at your throat.”

“So I see,” answered Zahir el Ghazi imperturbably. His blue eyes roved to the Turk, and he laughed with harsh mockery. “So you avoided the spillers of blood? I had thought you dead by this time. But the result will be the same. Fool! You have cut your throat! How you came into my chamber I know not; but one shout will bring my slaves.”

“Ancient houses have ancient secrets,” laughed the Turk. “One you have learned – that the walls of this chamber are so constructed as to muffle screams. Another you have not learned – the secret by which we came here tonight.” He turned to Diego de Guzman. “Well, why do you hesitate?”

De Guzman drew back and lowered his saber. “There lies your sword,” he said to the Berber, while Al Afdhal swore, half in disgust, half in amusement. “Take it up. If you are man enough to slay me, be it so. But I think you will never see the sun rise again.”

Zahir peered curiously at him.

“You are no Moor,” said the Berber. “I was born in the Atlas mountains, but I was raised in Malaga. You are a Spaniard. Who are you?”

Diego threw aside his tattered *kafiyeh*.

“Diego de Guzman,” said Zahir calmly. “I might have guessed. Well, *hidalgo*, you have come a long way to die – ”

He swooped up the heavy scimitar, then hesitated.

“You wear armor while I am naked but for silk and velvet.”

Diego kicked a helmet toward him, one of several pieces of armor cast carelessly about the chamber.

“I see the glint of mail beneath your vest,” he said. “You always wore a steel shirt. We are on equal terms. Stand to it, you dog; my soul thirsts for your blood.”

The Berber bent, donned the head-piece – leaped suddenly, hoping to catch his antagonist off-guard. But the Moorish saber clanged in mid-air against the Berber scimitar, and sparks showered as the two long curved blades wheeled, flashed, rose and fell, flickering in the lamp-light.

Both attacked, smiting furiously, each too intent on the life of the other to give much thought for showy sword-play. Each stroke had full weight and

murderous willing behind it. Such a battle could not long continue; the desperate recklessness of the combat must quickly bring it to a bloody conclusion, one way or another.

De Guzman fought in silence, but Zahir el Ghazi laughed and taunted his foe between lightning strokes.

“Dog!” The play of the Berber’s arm did not interfere with the play of his tongue. “It irks me to slay you here. Would that you might live to see the destruction of your accursed people. Why did I come to Egypt? Merely for refuge? Ha! I came to forge a sword for mine enemies, Christian and Moslem alike! I have urged the caliph to build a fleet – to lift the standards of *jihad* – to conquer the caliphate of Cordova!

“The Berber tribes are ripe for such a war. We will roar westward from Egypt like an avalanche that gains volume and momentum as it advances. With half a million warriors we will sweep into Spain – stamp Cordova into dust and incorporate its warriors into our ranks! Castile can not stand before us, and over the bodies of the Spanish knights we will sweep out into the plains of Europe!”

De Guzman spat a curse.

“Al Hakim has hesitated,” laughed Zahir, breathing evenly and easily, as he parried the whirring saber. “But tonight he sent me word – I have just come from the palace, where he told me it shall be as I have desired. He has a new whim; he believes himself to be God! No matter. Spain is doomed! If I survive, I shall be its caliph some day! And even if you slay me, you can not stop Al Hakim now. The *jihad* will be launched. The *harims* of Islam shall be filled with Castilian girls – ”

From de Guzman’s lips burst a harsh savage cry, as if he realized for the first time that the Berber was not merely taunting him with idle words, but was voicing an actual plot of conquest.

Face grey and eyes glaring, he plunged in with a fresh ferocity that made Al Afdhal stare. Zahir’s bearded lips offered no more taunts. The Berber’s whole attention was devoted to parrying the Spanish saber which beat on his blade like a hammer on an anvil.

The clash of steel rose until Al Afdhal chewed his lip in nervousness, knowing that some echo of the noise would surely reverberate beyond the muffling walls.

The sheer strength and berserk fury of the Spaniard were beginning to tell. The Berber was pallid under his bronzed skin. His breath came in

gasps, and he continually gave ground. Blood streamed from gashes on arms, thigh, and neck. De Guzman was bleeding too, but there was no slackening in the headlong frenzy of his attack.

Zahir was close to the tapestried wall, when suddenly he sprang aside as de Guzman lunged. Carried off balance by the wasted thrust, the Spaniard plunged forward, and his saber-point clashed against the stone beneath the tapestry. At the same instant Zahir slashed at his enemy's head with all his waning power. But the saber of Toledo steel, instead of snapping like a lesser blade, bent double, and sprang straight again. The descending scimitar bit through the Moorish helmet into the scalp beneath, but before Zahir could recover his balance, de Guzman's saber sheared upward through steel links and hip bone to grate into his spinal column.

The Berber reeled and fell with a choking cry, his entrails spilling on the floor. His fingers clawed briefly at the nap of the heavy carpet, then went limp.

De Guzman, blind with blood and sweat, was driving his sword in silent frenzy again and again into the form at his feet, too drunk with fury to know that his foe was dead, until Al Afdhal, cursing in something nearly like horror, dragged him away. The Spaniard dazedly raked the blood and sweat from his eyes and peered down groggily at his foe. He was still dizzy from the stroke that had cloven his steel head-piece. He tore off the riven helmet and threw it aside. It was full of blood, and a crimson torrent descended into his face, blinding him.

Cursing earnestly, he began groping for something to wipe it away, when he felt Al Afdhal's fingers at work. The Turk swiftly mopped the blood from his companion's features, and made shift to bind up the wound with strips torn from his own clothing.

Then, taking from his girdle something which de Guzman recognized as the ring Al Afdhal had taken from the finger of the black killer, Zaman, the Turk dropped it on the rug near Zahir's body.

"Why did you do that?" demanded the Spaniard.

"To blind the avengers of blood. Let us go quickly, in the name of Allah. The Berber's slaves must be all deaf or drunk, not to have awakened before now."

Even as they emerged into the corridor, where the dead mute stared sightlessly at the painted ceiling, they heard sounds indicative of wakefulness – a vague murmur of voices, a distant tramp of feet. Hurrying

down the hallway to the secret panel, they entered and groped in darkness until they emerged once more in the silent grove.

The paling stars were mirrored in the dark waters of the canal, and the first hint of dawn etched the minarets.

“Do you know a way into the palace of the caliph?” asked de Guzman. The bandage on his head was soaked with blood, and a thin trickle stole down his neck.

Al Afdhal turned, and they faced one another under the shadow of the trees.

“I aided you to slay a common enemy,” said the Turk. “I did not bargain to betray my sovereign to you! Al Hakim is mad, but his time has not yet come. I aided you in a matter of private vengeance – not in the war of nations. Be content with your vengeance, and remember that to fly too high is to scorch one’s wings in the sun.”

De Guzman mopped blood and made no reply.

“You had better leave Cairo as soon as possible,” said Al Afdhal, watching him narrowly. “I think it would be safer for all concerned. Sooner or later you will be detected as a *Feringhi* by someone not in your debt. I will furnish you with monies and horses – ”

“I have both,” grunted de Guzman, wiping the blood from his neck.

“And you will depart in peace?” demanded Al Afdhal.

“What choice have I?” returned the Spaniard.

“Swear,” insisted the Turk.

“By God, you are insistent,” grumbled de Guzman. “Very well: I swear by Saint James of Campostello, that I will leave the city before the sun reaches its zenith.”

“Good!” The Turk breathed a sigh of relief. “It is for your own good as much as anything else that I – ”

“I understand your altruistic motives,” grunted de Guzman. “If there was any debt between us, consider it paid, and let each man act accordingly.”

And turning, he strode away with a horseman’s swinging stride. Al Afdhal watched his broad shoulder receding through the trees, with a slight frown that betokened doubt.

IV

From mosque and minaret went forth the sonorous *adhan*. Before the mosque of Talai, outside the Bab Zuweyla, stood Darazai, the *muezzin*, and when he lifted his voice, and when he tolled it out across the tense throngs, men shuddered and finger nails bit into dusky palms.

" – And for that your divinely appointed caliph, Al Hakim, is of the seed of Ali, who was of the blood of the Prophet, who was God Incarnate, so is God this day among ye! Yea, the one God moves among ye in mortal shape! And now I command ye, all Believers in Al Islam, recognize and bow down and worship the one true God, Lord of the Three Worlds, the Creator of the Universe, Who set up the firmament without pillars in its stead, the Incarnation of Divine Wisdom, who is God, who is Al Hakim, the seed of Ali!"

A great shudder rippled across the throng; then a frenzied yell broke the breathless stillness. A wild-haired figure ran forward, a half naked Arab. With a shriek of "Blasphemer!" he caught up a stone and hurled it. The missile struck the *mullah* full in the mouth, breaking his teeth. He staggered, blood streaming down his beard. And with an awesome roar, the mob heaved and billowed and surged forward. Taxation, starvation, rapine, massacre – all these the Egyptians could endure; but this stroke at the roots of their religion was the last straw. Staid merchants became madmen; cringing beggars turned into rabid-eyed devils.

Stones flew like hail, and louder and louder rose the roar, the bedlam of wild beasts, or men gone mad. Hands were clutching at the stunned Darazai's garments, when men of the Turkish guard in chain mail and spired helmets beat the mob back with their scimitars, and carried the terrified *mullah* into the mosque, which they barricaded against the surging multitude.

With a clanking of weapons and a jingling of bridle-chains, a troop of Sudani horse, resplendent in gold-chased corselets and silk breeches, galloped out of the Zuweyla gate. The white teeth of the black riders shone in wide grins of glee; their eyes rolled, they licked their thick lips in anticipation. The stones of the mob rattled harmlessly on their cuirasses and hippo-hide bucklers. They urged their horses into the press, slashing with their curved blades. Men rolled howling under the stamping hoofs. The

rioters gave way, fleeing wildly into shops and down alleys, leaving the square littered with writhing bodies.

The black riders leaped from their saddles and began crashing in doors of shops and dwellings, heaping their arms with plunder. Screams of women resounded from within the houses. A shriek, a crash of glass and lattice-work, and a white-clad body struck the street with a bone-crushing impact. A black face looked down through the ruined casement, split in an empty belly-shaking laugh. A black horseman spurred forward, bent from his saddle and thrust his lance through the still quivering form of the woman on the stones.

The giant Othman, in flaming silk and polished steel, rode among his black dogs, beating them off. They mounted, swung into line behind him. In a swinging canter they swept down the streets, gory human heads bobbing on their lances – an object lesson for the maddened Cairenes who crouched in their coverts, panting with hot-eyed hate.

The breathless eunuch who brought news of the uprising and its suppression to Al Hakim, was followed swiftly by another, who prostrated himself before the caliph and cried: “Oh Lord of the Three Worlds, the emir Zahir el Ghazi is dead! His servants found him murdered in his palace, and beside him the ring of Zaman the black Sworder. Wherefore the Berbers cry out that he was murdered by order of the emir Othman, and they search for Zaman in el Mansuriya, and fight with the Sudani!”

Zaida, listening behind a curtain, stifled a cry, and clutched at her bosom in brief, passing pain. But Al Hakim’s inscrutable, far-away gaze did not alter; he was wrapped in aloofness, isolated in the contemplation of mystery.

“Let the Memluks separate them,” said he. “Shall private feuds interfere with the destiny of God? El Ghazi is dead, but Allah lives. Another man shall be found to lead my troops into Spain. Meanwhile, let the building of ships commence. Let the Sudani handle the mob until they realize their folly and the sin of their heresy. I have recognized my destiny, which is to reveal myself to the world in blood and fire, until all the tribes of the earth know me and bow down before me. You have my leave to go!”

Night was falling on a tense city as Diego de Guzman strode through the streets of the section adjoining el Mansuriya, the quarter of the Sudani. In that section, occupied mostly by soldiers, lights shone and stalls were open by tacit unspoken agreement. All day revolt had rumbled in the quarters; the

mob was like a thousand-headed serpent; stamp it out in one place, and it broke out anew in another, cursing, yelling and throwing stones. The hoofs of the Sudani had clattered from Zuweyla to the mosque of Ibn Tulun and back again, spattering blood.

Only armed men now traversed the streets. The great wooden, iron-bound gates of the quarters were locked, as in times of civil war. Through the lowering arch of the great gate of Zuweyla, cantered troops of black horsemen, the torchlight crimsoning their naked scimitars. Their silk cloaks flowed in the wind, their black arms gleamed like polished ebony.

De Guzman had not broken his oath to Al Afdhal. Sure that the Turk would betray him to the Moslems if he did not seem to comply with the other's demand, the Spaniard had ridden out of the city, and into the Mukattam hills, before the sun was high. But he had not sworn he would not return. Sunset had seen him riding into the crumbling suburbs, where thieves and jackals slunk with furtive tread.

Now he moved on foot through the streets, entering the shops where girdled warriors gorged themselves on melons and nuts and meat, and surreptitiously guzzled wine, and he listened to their talk.

"Where are the Berbers?" demanded a moustached Turk, cramming his jaws with a handful of almond cakes.

"They sulk in their quarter," answered another. "They swear that el Ghazi was slain by the Sudani, and display Zaman's ring to prove it. All men know that ring. But Zaman has disappeared. The black emir Othman swears he knows naught of it. But he can not deny the ring. Already a dozen men had been killed in brawls when the caliph ordered us Memluks to beat them apart. By Allah, this has been a day of days!"

"The madness of Al Hakim has brought it about," declared another, lowering his voice and glancing warily around. "How long shall we suffer this Shiite dog to lord it over us?"

"Have a care," cautioned his mate. "He is caliph, and our swords are his – as long as Es Salih Muhammad so orders it. But if the revolt breaks out afresh, the Berbers are more likely to fight against the Sudani than with them. Men say that Al Hakim has taken Zaida, el Ghazi's concubine, into his *harim*, and that angers the Berbers more, making them suspect that el Ghazi was slain, if not by the order of Al Hakim, at least with his consent. But *Wellah*, their anger is naught beside that of Zulaikha, whom the caliph has put aside! Her rage, men say, is that of a desert storm."

De Guzman waited to hear no more, but rising, he hastened out of the wine-shop. If anyone knew the secrets of the royal palace, that one was Zulaikha. And a discarded mistress is a sure tool for vengeance. De Guzman's mission had become more than a private hunt for the life of a personal enemy. Even now out of the mysterious fastnesses of the caliph's palace rumors crept, and already in the bazaars men spoke of an invasion of Spain. De Guzman knew that the ferocious fighting ability of the Spaniards would not, in the end, avail them against such a force as Al Hakim might be able to hurl against them. Perhaps only a madman would entertain the idea of world empire, but a madman might accomplish it; and whatever the ultimate fate of Europe, the doom of Castile was sealed if the hordes of Africa rolled up the mountain passes. De Guzman thought little of Europe; the lands beyond the Pyrenees were dim and shadowy to him, not much more real than the empires of Alexander and the Caesars. It was Castile of which he thought, and the fierce passionate people of the savage uplands, than which no other blood beat hotly through his veins.

Skirting el Mansuriya, he crossed the canal and made his way to the grove of palms near the shore. Groping in the darkness among the marble ruins, he found and lifted the slab. Again he advanced through pitch blackness and dripping water, stumbled on the other stair and mounted it. His fingers found and worked a metal bolt, and he emerged into the now unlighted corridor. The house was silent but the reflection of lights elsewhere indicated that it was still occupied, doubtless by the slain emir's servants and women.

Uncertain as to which way led to the outer air, he set off at random, passed through a curtained archway – and found himself confronted by half a dozen black slaves who sprang up glaring, sword in hand. Before he could retreat he heard a shout and rush of feet behind him. Cursing his luck, he ran straight at the bewildered black men. A flickering whirl of steel and he was through, leaving a writhing, bleeding form behind him, and was dashing through a doorway on the other side of the broad chamber. Curved blades were whickering at his back, and as he slammed the door behind him, steel rang on the stout oak, and glittering points showed in the splintering panels. He shot the bolt and whirled, glaring about for an avenue of escape. His gaze fell on a gold-barred window nearby.

With a headlong rush and a straining gasp of effort, he launched himself full into the window. With a splintering crash the soft bars gave way, the

whole casement was torn out before the impact of his hurtling body. He shot through into empty space, just as the door crashed inward and a swarm of howling figures flooded into the room.

V

In the Great East Palace, where slave-girls and eunuchs glided on stealthy bare feet, no echo reverberated of the hell that raged outside the walls. In a chamber whose dome was of gold-filigreed ivory, Al Hakim, clad in a white silk robe that made him look even more ghostly and unreal, sat cross-legged on a couch of gemmed ebony, and stared with his wide unblinking eyes at Zaida the Venetian who knelt before him.

Zaida was no longer clad in the rags of a slave. Her *dolyman* was of crimson Mosul silk, bordered with cloth-of-gold, her girdle of satin sewn with pearls. The fabric of her wide bag drawers was sheer as gossamer, seeming to glow softly with the pink flesh it scarcely veiled. Her ear-rings were set with great pear-shaped jewels. Her long lashes were touched with *kohl,* her fingers tipped with henna. She knelt on a cloth-of-gold cushion.

But amidst all this splendor, which outshone anything even this play-thing of princes had ever known, the Venetian's eyes were shadowed. For the first time in her life she found herself actually to be a plaything. She had inspired Al Hakim's latest madness, but she had not mastered him. A night, an hour, she had expected to bend him to her will. Now he seemed withdrawn from her, and there was an expression in his cold inhuman eyes which made her shudder.

Suddenly he spoke, ponderously, portentously, like a god voicing doom: "It is not meet that gods mate with mortals."

She started, opened her mouth, then feared to speak.

"Love is human and a weakness," he continued broodingly. "I will cast it from me. Gods are beyond love. And weakness assails me when I lie in your arms."

"What do you mean, my lord?" she ventured fearfully.

"Even the gods must sacrifice," he answered somberly. "Love of a human is blasphemy to the godhead. I give you up, lest my divinity weaken."

He clapped his hands deliberately, and a eunuch entered on all-fours – a newly instituted custom.

"Send in the emir Othman," ordered Al Hakim, and the eunuch bumped his head violently against the floor and backed awkwardly out of the presence.

“*No!*” Zaida sprang up in a frenzy. “Oh my lord, have mercy! You can not give me to that black beast! You can not – ”

She was on her knees, catching at his robe, which he drew back from her fingers.

“Woman!” he thundered. “Are you mad? Would you draw doom upon yourself? Would you assail the person of God?”

Othman entered uncertainly, and in evident trepidation; a warrior of barbaric Darfur, he had risen to his present high estate by wild fighting and a brutal form of diplomacy.

Al Hakim pointed to the cowering woman at his feet and spake briefly: “Take her!”

The Sudani never questioned the commands of his monarch. A broad grin split his ebon countenance, and stooping, he caught up Zaida, who writhed and screamed in his grasp. As he bore her out of the chamber, she twisted in his arms, extending her white hands in passionate entreaty. Al Hakim answered not; he sat with hands folded, his gaze detached and impersonal as that of a hashish eater. If he heard the screams of his erstwhile favorite, he gave no sign.

But another heard. Crouching in an alcove, a slim brown-skinned girl watched the grinning Sudani carry his writhing captive up the hall. Scarcely had he vanished when she fled in another direction, garments caught up above her twinkling brown legs.

Othman, the favored of the caliph, alone of all the emirs dwelt in the Great Palace, which was really an aggregation of palaces united in one mighty structure, which housed thirty thousand servants of Al Hakim. He dwelt in a wing that opened on to the southern quarter of the Beyn el Kasreyn. To reach it, it was not necessary for him to emerge from the palace. Following winding corridors, crossing an occasional open court paved with mosaics and bordered with fretted arches supported on alabaster columns, he came to his own house.

Black swordsmen guarded the door of black teak, banded with arabesqued copper which separated his quarters from the rest of the palace. But even as he came in sight of that door, down a broad panelled corridor, a supple form glided from a curtained doorway and barred his way.

“Zulaikha!” The black recoiled in almost superstitious awe; the woman’s slim white hands clenched and unclenched in a refinement of passion too

subtle and deep for his brutish comprehension; and over the filmy *yasmaq* her eyes burned like gems from hell.

"A servant brought me word that Al Hakim had discarded the red-haired slut," said the Arab. "Sell her therefore to me! For I owe her a debt that I fain would pay."

"Why should I sell her?" objected the Sudani, fidgeting in animal impatience. "The caliph has given her to me. Stand aside, woman, lest I do you an injury."

"Have you heard what the Berbers shout in the streets?" she asked.

He started, greying slightly. "What is that to me?" he blustered, but his voice was not steady.

"They howl for the head of Othman," she said coolly and with venom. "They call you the murderer of Zahir el Ghazi. What if I went to them and told them that what they suspect is true?"

"But I had naught to do with it!" he exclaimed wildly, like a man caught in an unseen net.

"I can produce men to swear they saw you help Zaman cut him down," she assured him.

"I'll kill you!" he whispered.

She laughed in his face.

"You dare not, black beast of the grass lands! Now will you sell me the red-haired jade, or will you fight the Berbers?"

His hands slipped from their hold and let Zaida fall to the floor.

"Take her and begone!" he muttered, his black skin ashen.

"Take first your pay!" she retorted with vindictive malice, and hurled a handful of coins full in his face. He shrank back like a great black ape, his eyes burning red, his dusky hands opening and closing in helpless blood-lust.

Ignoring him, Zulaikha bent over Zaida, who crouched dazed with sick helplessness, crushed by the realization of her impotence against this new conqueror, against whom, as a member of her own sex, all the witchery and wiles she had played against men were helpless. Zulaikha gathered the Venetian's red locks in her fingers and forcing her head brutally back, stared into her eyes with a fierce and hungry possessiveness that turned Zaida's blood to ice.

The Arab clapped her hands and four Syrian eunuchs entered.

“Take her up and bear her to my house,” Zulaikha ordered, and they laid hold of the shrinking Venetian and bore her away. Zulaikha followed, her pink nails sinking into her palms, as she breathed softly between her clenching teeth.

VI

When Diego de Guzman plunged through the window, he had no idea of what lay in the darkness beneath him. He did not fall far, and he crashed among shrubs that broke his fall. Springing up, he saw his pursuers crowding through the window he had just shattered, hindering one another by their numbers. He was in a garden, a great shadowy place of trees and ghostly blossoms. The next instant he was racing among the shadows, weaving in and out among the shrubbery. His hunters blundered among the trees, running aimlessly and at a loss. Unopposed he reached the wall, sprang high, caught the coping with one hand, and heaved himself up and over.

He halted and sought to orient himself. He had never been in the streets of El Kahira before, but he had heard the inner city described so often that a mental map of it was in his mind. He knew that he was in the Quarter of the Emirs, and ahead of him, over the flat roofs, loomed a great structure which could be only the Lesser West Palace, a gigantic pleasure house, giving onto the far-famed Garden of Kafur. Fairly sure of his ground, he hurried along the narrow street into which he had fallen, and soon emerged on to the broad thoroughfare which traversed El Kahira from the Gate of el Futuh in the north to the Gate of Zuweyla in the south.

Late as it was there was much stirring abroad. Armed Memluks rode past him; in the broad Beyn el Kasreyn, the great square which lay between the twin palaces, he heard the jingle of reins on restive horses, and saw a squadron of Sudani troopers sitting their steeds under the torchlight. There was reason for their alertness. Far away he heard tom-toms drumming sullenly among the quarters. Somewhere beyond the walls a dull light began to glow against the stars. The wind brought snatches of wild song and distant yells.

With his soldier’s swagger, and saber hilt thrust prominently forward, de Guzman passed unnoticed among the mailed and weapon-girded figures that stalked the streets. When he ventured to pluck a bearded Memluk’s sleeve and inquire the way to the house of Zulaikha, the Turk gave the information readily and without surprize. De Guzman knew – as all Cairo knew – that however much the Arab had regarded Al Hakim as her special property, she had by no means considered herself the exclusive possession

of the caliph. There were mercenary captains who were as familiar with her chambers as was Al Hakim.

Zulaikha's house stood just off the broad street, built closely adjoining a court of the East Palace, to the gardens of which indeed it was connected, so that Zulaikha, in the days of her favoritism, could pass between her house and the palace without violating the caliph's order concerning the seclusion of women. Zulaikha was no servitor; she was the daughter of a free shaykh, and she had been Al Hakim's mistress, not his slave.

De Guzman did not anticipate any great difficulty in obtaining entrance into her house; she pulled hidden strings of intrigue and politics, and men of all creeds and conditions were admitted into her audience chamber, where dancing girls and opium offered entertainment. That night there were no dancing girls or guests, but a villainous looking Yemenite without question opened the arched door above which burned a cresset, and showed the false Moor across a small court, up an outer stair, down a corridor and into a broad chamber into which opened a number of fretted arches hung with crimson velvet tapestries.

The room was empty, under the soft glow of the bronze lamps, but somewhere in the house sounded the sharp cry of a woman in pain, accompanied by rich musical laughter, also in a woman’s voice, and indescribably vindictive and malicious.

But de Guzman gave it little heed, for it was at that moment that all hell burst loose outside the walls of El Kahira.

It was a muffled roaring of incredible volume, like the bellowing of a pent-up torrent at last bursting its dam; but it was the wild beast howling of many men. The Yemenite heard too, and went livid under his swarthy skin.

Then he cried out and ran into the corridor, as there sounded the swift padding of feet, and a laboring breath.

In a nearby chamber, straightening from a task she found indescribably amusing, Zulaikha heard a strangled scream outside the door, the swish and chop of a savage blow, and the thud of a falling body. The door burst open and Othman rushed in, a wild and terrifying figure, white eyeballs and bared teeth gleaming in the lamplight, blood dripping from his broad scimitar.

“Dog!” she exclaimed, drawing herself up like a serpent from its coil. “What do you here?”

“The woman you took from me!” he mouthed, ape-like in his passion. “The red-haired woman! Hell is loose in Cairo! The quarters have risen! The streets will swim in blood before dawn! Kill! kill! kill! I ride to cut down the Sunnite dogs like bamboo stalks. One more killing in all this slaughter means nothing! Give me the woman before I kill you!”

Drunk with blood-hunger and frustrated lust, the maddened black had forgotten his fear of Zulaikha. The Arab cast a glance at the naked, quivering figure that lay stretched out and bound hand and foot to a divan. She had not yet worked her full will on her rival. What she had already done had been but an amusing prelude to torture, mutilation and death – agonizing only in its humiliation. All hell could not take her victim from her.

“Ali! Abdullah! Ahmed!” she shrieked, drawing a jeweled dagger.

With a bull-like roar, the huge black lunged. The Arab had never fought men, and her supple quickness, without experience or knowledge of combat, was futile. The broad blade plunged through her body, standing out a foot between her shoulders. With a choked cry of agony and awful surprize she crumpled, and the Sudani brutally wrenched his scimitar free as she fell. At that instant Diego de Guzman appeared at the door.

The Spaniard knew nothing of the circumstances; he only saw a huge black man tearing his sword out of the body of a white woman; and he acted according to his instincts.

Othman, wheeling like a great cat, threw up his dripping scimitar, only to have it beaten stunningly down on his woolly skull beneath de Guzman’s terrific stroke. He staggered, and the next instant the saber, wielded with all the power of the Spaniard’s knotty muscles, clove his left arm from the shoulder, sheared down through his ribs, and wedged deep in his pelvis.

De Guzman, grunting and swearing as he twisted his blade out of the prisoning tissue and bone, sweating in fear of an attack before he could free the weapon, heard the rising thunder of the mob, and the hair lifted on his head. He knew that roar – the hunting yell of men, the thunder that has shaken the thrones of the world all down through the ages. He heard the clatter of hoofs on the streets outside, fierce voices shouting commands.

He turned toward the outer corridor when he heard a voice begging for something, and wheeling back into the chamber, saw, for the first time, the naked figure writhing on the divan. Her limbs and body showed neither gash nor bruise, but her cheeks were wet with tears, the red locks that streamed in wild profusion over her white shoulders were damp with perspiration, and her flesh quivered as if from torture.

"Free me!" she begged. "Zulaikha is dead – free me, in God's name!"

With a muttered oath of impatience he slashed her cords and turned away again, almost instantly forgetting about her. He did not see her rise and glide through a curtained doorway.

Outside a voice shouted: "Othman! Name of Shaitan, where are you? It is time to mount and ride! I saw you run in here! Devil take you, you black dog, where *are* you?"

A mailed and helmeted figure dashed into the chamber, then halted short.

"What – ? *Wellah!* You lied to me!"

"Not I!" responded de Guzman cheerfully. "I left the city as I swore to do; but I came back."

"Where is Othman?" demanded Al Afdhal. "I followed him in here – Allah!" He plucked his moustaches wildly. "By God, the One True God! Oh, cursed Caphar! Why *must* you slay Othman? All the cities have risen, and the Berbers are fighting the Sudani, who had their hands full already. I ride with my men to aid the Sudani. As for you – I still owe you my life, but there is a limit to all things! In Allah's name, get you gone, and never let me see you again!"

De Guzman grinned wolfishly. "You are not rid of me so easily this time, *Es Salih Muhammad!*"

The Turk started. "What?"

"Why continue this masquerade?" retorted de Guzman. "I knew you when we went into the house of Zahir el Ghazi, which was once the house of Es Salih Muhammad. Only a master of the house could be so familiar with its secrets. You helped me kill el Ghazi because the Berber had hired

Zaman and the others to kill you. Good enough. But that is not all. I came to Egypt to kill el Ghazi; that is done; but now Al Hakim plots the ruin of Spain. He must die; and you must aid me in his overthrow."

"You are mad as Al Hakim!" exclaimed the Turk.

"What if I went to the Berbers and told them that you aided me to slay their emir?" asked de Guzman.

"They would cut you to pieces!"

"Aye, so they would! But they would likewise cut you to pieces. And the Sudani would aid them; neither loves the Turks. Berbers and blacks together will cut down every Turk in Cairo. Then where is your ambition, when your head is off? I will die, yes; but if I set Sudani, Turk and Berber to slaying each other, perchance the rebellion will whelm them all, and I will have gained in death what I could not in life."

Es Salih Muhammad recognized the grim determination which lay behind the Castilian's words.

"I see I must slay you, after all!" he muttered, drawing his scimitar. The next instant the chamber resounded to the clash of steel.

At the first pass de Guzman realized that the Turk was the finest swordsman he had ever met; he was ice where the Spaniard was fire. To his reluctance to kill Es Salih was added the knowledge that he was opposed by a greater swordsman than himself. And the thought nerved him to desperate fury, so that the headlong recklessness that had always been his weakness, became his strength. His life did not matter; but if he fell in that blood-stained chamber, Castile fell with him.

Outside the walls of El Kahira the mob surged and ravened, torches showered sparks, and steel drank and reddened. Inside the chamber of dead Zulaikha the curved blades sang and whistled. Smite, Diego de Guzman! (they sang). Spain hangs on your arm. Strike for the glories of yesterday and the splendors of tomorrow. Strike for the thunder of arms, the rustle of banners in the mountain winds, the agony of endeavor, and the blood of martyrdom; strike for the spears of the uplands, the black-haired women, fires on the red hearths, and the trumpets of empires yet to be! Strike for the unborn kingdoms, the pageantry of glory, and the great galleons rolling across a golden sea to a world undreamed! Strike for the wonder that is Spain, aged and ever ageless, the phoenix of nations, rising for ever from the ashes of a dead past to burn among the standards of the world!

Through his parted lips Es Salih Muhammad's breath hissed. Under his dark skin grew an ashy hue. Skill nor craft availed him against this blazing-eyed incarnation of fury who came on in an irresistible surge, smiting like a smith on an anvil.

Under the brown-crusted bandage de Guzman's wound was bleeding afresh, and the blood poured down his temple, but his sword was like a flaming wheel. The Turk could only parry; he had no opportunity to strike back.

Es Salih Muhammad was fighting for personal ambition; Diego de Guzman was fighting for the future of a nation.

A last gasping heave of thew-wrenching effort, an explosive burst of dynamic power, and the scimitar was beaten from the Turk's hand. He reeled back with a cry, not of pain or fear, but of despair. De Guzman, his broad breast heaving from his exertions, turned away.

"I will not cut you down myself," he said. "Nor will I force an oath from you at sword's edge. You would not keep it. I go to the Berbers, and my doom – and yours. Farewell; I would have made you vizir of Egypt!"

"Wait!" panted Es Salih, grasping at a hanging for support. "Let us reason this matter! What do you mean?"

"What I say!" De Guzman wheeled back from the door, galvanized with a feeling that he had the desperate game in his hand at last. "Do you not realize that at the instant you hold the balance of power? The Sudani and the Berbers fight each other, and the Cairenes fight both! Neither faction can win without your support. The way you throw your Memluks will be the deciding factor. You planned to support the Sudani and crush both the Berbers and the rebels. But suppose you threw in your lot with the Berbers? Suppose you appeared as the *leader* of the revolt, the upholder of the orthodox creed against a blasphemer? El Ghazi is dead; Othman is dead; the mob has no leader. You are the only strong man left in Cairo. You sought honors under Al Hakim; greater honors are yours for the asking! Join the Berbers with your Turks, and stamp out the Sudani! The mob will acclaim you as a liberator. Kill Al Hakim! Set up another caliph, with yourself as vizir, and real ruler! I will ride at your side, and my sword is yours!"

Es Salih, who had been listening like a man in a dream, gave a sudden shout of laughter, like a drunken man. Realization that de Guzman wished to use him as a pawn to crush a foe of Spain was drowned in the heady wine of personal ambition.

“*Done!*” he trumpeted. “To horse, brother! You have shown me the way I sought! Es Salih Muhammad shall yet rule Egypt!”

VII

In the great square in el Mansuriya, the tossing torches blazed on a maelstrom of straining, plunging figures, screaming horses, and lashing blades. Men brown, black and white fought hand-to-hand, Berber, Sudani, Egyptian, gasping, cursing, slaying and dying.

For a thousand years Egypt had slept under the heel of foreign masters; now she awoke, and crimson was the awakening.

Like brainless madmen the Cairenes grappled the black slayers, dragging them bodily from their saddles, slashing the girths of the frenzied horses. Rusty pikes clanged against lances. Fire burst out in a hundred places, mounting into the skies until the herdsmen on Mukattam awoke and gaped in wonder. From all the suburbs poured wild and frantic figures, a roaring torrent with a thousand branches all converging on the great square. Hundreds of still shapes, in mail or striped *kaftans*, lay under the trampling hoofs, the stamping feet, and over them the living screamed and hacked.

The square lay in the heart of the Sudani quarter, into which had come ravening the blood-mad Berbers while the bulk of the blacks had been fighting the mob in other parts of the city. Now, withdrawn in haste to their own quarter, the ebony swordsmen were overwhelming the Berbers with sheer numbers, while the mob threatened to engulf both hordes. The Sudani, under their captain Izz ed din, maintained some semblance of order, which gave them an advantage over the unorganized Berbers and the leaderless mob.

The maddened Cairenes were smashing and plundering the houses of the blacks, dragging forth howling women; the blaze of burning buildings made the square swim in an ocean of fire.

Somewhere there began the whir of Tatar kettle-drums, above the throb of many hoofs.

“The Turks at last,” panted Izz ed din. “They have loitered long enough! And where in Allah’s name is Othman?”

Into the square raced a frantic horse, foam flying from the bit-rings. The rider reeled in the saddle, gay-hued garments in tatters, ebony skin laced with crimson.

“Izz ed din!” he screamed, clinging to the flying mane with both hands. “*Izz ed din!*”

“Here, fool!” roared the Sudani, catching the other’s bridle and hurling the horse back on its haunches.

“Othman is dead!” shrieked the man above the roar of the flames and the rising thunder of the onrushing kettle-drums. “The Turks have turned on us! They slay our brothers in the palaces! Aie! They come!”

With a deafening thunder of hoofs and an earth-shaking roll of drums, the squadrons of mailed spearmen burst upon the square, cleaving the waves of carnage, riding down friend and foe alike. Izz ed din saw the dark exultant face of Es Salih Muhammad beneath the blazing arc of his scimitar, and with a roar he reined full at him, his house-troops swirling in behind him.

But with a strange war-cry a rider in Moorish garb rose in the stirrups and smote, and Izz ed din went down; and over the slashed bodies of his captains stormed the hoofs of the slayers, a dark, roaring river that thundered on into the flame riven night.

On the rocky spurs of Mukattam the herdsmen watched and shivered, seeing the blaze of fire and slaughter from the Gate el Futuh to the mosque of Ibn Tulun; and the clangor of swords was heard as far south as El Fustat, where pallid nobles trembled in their garden-lapped palaces.

Like a crimson foaming, frothing, flame-faceted torrent, the tides of fury overflowed the quarters and gushed through the Gate of Zuweyla, staining the streets of El Kahira, the Victorious. In the great Beyn el Kasreyn, where ten thousand men could be paraded, the Sudani made their last stand, and there they died, hemmed in by helmeted Turks, shrieking Berbers and frantic Cairenes.

It was the mob which first turned its attention to Al Hakim. Rushing through the arabesqued bronze doors of the Great East Palace, the ragged hordes streamed howling down the corridors through the Golden Gates into the great Golden Hall, tearing aside the curtain of gilt filigree to reveal an empty golden throne. Silk embroidered tapestries were ripped from the friezed walls by grimed and bloody fingers; sardonyx tables were overthrown with a clatter of gold enamelled vessels; eunuchs in crimson robes fled squeaking, slave-girls screamed in the hands of the ravishers.

In the Great Emerald Hall, Al Hakim stood like a statue on a fur-strewn dais. His white hands twitched, his eyes were clouded; he seemed like a drunken man. At the entrance of the hall clustered a handful of faithful servants, beating back the mob with drawn swords. A band of Berbers ploughed through the motley throng and closed with the black slaves, and in

that storm of sword-strokes, no man had time to glance at the white rigid figure on the dais.

Al Hakim felt a hand tugging at his elbow, and looked into the face of Zaida, seeing her as in a dream.

“Come, my lord!” she urged. “All Egypt has risen against you! Think of your own life! Follow me!”

He suffered her to lead him. He moved like a man in a trance, mumbling: “But I am God! How can a god know defeat? How can a god die?”

Drawing aside the tapestry she led him into a secret alcove and down a long narrow corridor. Zaida had learned well the secrets of the Great Palace during her brief sojourn there. Through dim spice-scented gardens she led him hurriedly, through a winding street amidst flat-topped houses. She had thrown her *khalat* over him. None of the few folk they met heeded the hastening pair. A small gate, hidden behind clustering palms, let them through the wall. North and east El Kahira was hemmed in by empty desert. They had come out on the eastern side. Behind them and far away down the south rose the roar of flames and slaughter, but about them was only the desert, silence and the stars. Zaida halted, and her eyes burned in the starlight as she stood unspeaking.

“I am God,” muttered Al Hakim dazedly. “Suddenly the world was in flames. Yet I am God – ”

He scarcely felt the Venetian’s strong arms about him in a last terrible embrace. He scarcely heard her whisper: “You gave me into the hands of a black beast! Whereby I fell into the clutches of my rival, who dealt me such shame as men do not dream of! I guided your escape because none but Zaida shall destroy you, Al Hakim, fool who thought you were a god!”

Even as he felt the mortal bite of her dagger, he moaned: “Yet I am God – and the gods can not die – ” Somewhere a jackal began to yelp.

Back in El Kahira, in the Great East Palace, whose mosaics were fouled with blood, Diego de Guzman, a blood-stained figure, turned to Es Salih Muhammad, equally disheveled and stained.

“Where is Al Hakim?”

“What matter?” laughed the Turk. “He has fallen; we are lords of Egypt this night, you and I! Tomorrow another will sit in the seat of the caliph, a puppet whose string I pull. Tomorrow I will be vizir, and you – ask what you will! But tonight we rule in naked power, by the sheen of our swords!”

“Yet I would like to drive my saber through Al Hakim as a fitting climax to this night’s work,” answered de Guzman.

But it was not to be, though men with thirsty daggers ranged through tapestried halls and arched chambers until to hate and rage began to be added wonder and the superstitious awe which grows into legends of miraculous disappearances, and through mysteries invokes the supernatural. Time turns devils and madmen into saints and *hadjis*; afar in the mountains of Lebanon the Druses await the coming again of Al Hakim the Divine. But though they wait until the trumpets have blown for the passing of ten thousand years, they will be no nearer the portals of Mystery. And only the jackals which haunt the hills of Mukattam and the vultures which fold their wings on the towers of Bab el Vezir could tell the ultimate destiny of the man who would be God.

The Outgoing of Sigurd the Jerusalem-Farer

The fires roared in the skalli-hall,
And a woman begged me stay –
But the bitter night was falling
And the cold wind calling
Across the moaning spray.

How could I stay in the feasting-hall
When the wild wind walked the sea?
The feet of the winds drew out my soul
To the grey waves and the cloud's scroll
Where the gulls wheel and the whales roll,
And the abyss roars to me.

Man the sweeps and bend the sail –
We need no oars tonight,
For the sharp sleet drives before the gale
That dashes the spray across the rail
To freeze on helmet and corselet scale,
And the waves are running white.

I could not bide in the feasting-hall
Where the great fires light the rooms –
For the winds are walking the night for me
And I must follow where gaunt lands be,
Seeking, beyond some nameless sea,
The dooms beyond the dooms.

The Road of Azrael

I

Towers reel as they burst asunder,
Streets run red in the butchered town;
Standards fall and the lines go under
And the iron horsemen ride me down.
Out of the strangling dust around me
Let me ride for my hour is nigh,
From the walls that prison, the hoofs that ground me,
To the sun and the desert wind to die.

Allaho akbar! There is no God but God. These happenings I, Kosru Malik, chronicle that men may know truth thereby. For I have seen madness beyond human reckoning; aye, I have ridden the road of Azrael that is the Road of Death, and have seen mailed men fall like garnered grain; and here I detail the truths of that madness and of the doom of Kizilshehr the Strong, the Red City, which has faded like a summer cloud in the blue skies.

Thus was the beginning. As I sat in peace in the camp of Muhammad Khan, sultan of Kizilshehr, conversing with divers warriors on the merits of the verses of one Omar Khayyam, a tent-maker of Nishapur and a doughty toper, suddenly I was aware that one came close to me, and I felt anger burn in his gaze, as a man feels the eyes of a hungry tiger upon him. I looked up and as the fire-light took his bearded face, I felt my own eyes blaze with an old hate. For it was Moktra Mirza, the Kurd, who stood above me and there was an old feud between us. I have scant love for any Kurd, but this dog I hated. I had not known he was in the camp of Muhammad Khan, whither I had ridden alone at dusk, but where the lion feasts, there the jackals gather.

No word passed between us. Moktra Mirza had his hand on his blade and when he saw he was perceived, he drew with a rasp of steel. But he was slow as an ox. Gathering my feet under me, I shot erect, my scimitar springing to my hand and as I leaped I struck, and the keen edge sheared through his neck cords.

Even as he crumpled, gushing blood, I sprang across the fire and ran swiftly through the maze of tents, hearing a clamor of pursuit behind me. Sentries patrolled the camp, and ahead of me I saw one on a tall bay, who

sat gaping at me. I wasted no time but running up to him, I seized him by the leg and cast him from the saddle.

The bay horse reared as I swung up, and was gone like an arrow, I bending low on the saddle-peak for fear of shafts. I gave the bay his head and in an instant we were past the horse-lines and the sentries who gave tongue like a pack of hounds, and the fires were dwindling behind us.

We struck the open desert, flying like the wind, and my heart was glad. The blood of my foe was on my blade, a good steed between my knees, the stars of the desert above me, the night wind in my face. A Turk need ask no more.

The bay was a better horse than the one I had left in the camp, and the saddle was a goodly one, richly brocaded and worked in Persian leather.

For a time I rode with a loose rein, then as I heard no sound of pursuit, I slowed the bay to a walk, for who rides on a weary horse in the desert, dices with Death. Far behind me I saw the twinkling of the camp-fires and wondered that a hundred Kurds were not howling on my trail. But so swiftly had the deed been done and so swiftly had I fled, that the avengers were bemused and though men followed, hot with hate, they missed my trail in the dark, I learned later.

I had ridden west by blind chance and now I came on to the old caravan route that once led from Edessa to Kizilshehr and Shiraz. Even then it was almost abandoned because of the Frankish robbers. It came to me that I would ride to the caliphs and lend them my sword, so I rode leisurely across the desert which here is a very broken land, flat, sandy levels giving way to rugged stretches of ravines and low hills, and these again running out into plains. The breezes from the Persian Gulf cooled me and even while I listened for the drum of hoofs behind me, I dreamed of the days of my early childhood when I rode, night-herding the ponies, on the great upland plains far to the East, beyond the Oxus.

And then after some hours, I heard the sound of men and horses, but from in front of me. Far ahead I made out, in the dim starlight, a line of horsemen and a lurching bulk I knew to be a wagon such as the Persians use to transport their wealth and their harems. Some caravan bound for Muhammad’s camp, or for Kizilshehr beyond, I thought, and did not wish to be seen by them, who might put the avengers on my trail.

So I reined aside into a broken maze of gullies, and sitting my steed behind a huge boulder, I watched the travellers. They approached my hiding

place and I, straining my eyes in the vague light, saw that they were Seljuk Turks, heavily armed. One who seemed a leader sate his horse in a manner somehow familiar to me, and I knew I had seen him before. I decided that the wagon must contain some princess, and wondered at the fewness of the guards. There was not above thirty of them, enough to resist the attack of nomad raiders, no doubt, but certainly not a strong enough force to beat off the Franks who were wont to swoop down on Moslem wayfarers. And this puzzled me, because men, horses and wagon had the look of long travel, as if from beyond the Caliphate. And beyond the Caliphate lay a waste of Frankish robbers.

Now the wagon was abreast of me, and one of the wheels creaking in the rough ground, lurched into a depression and hung there. The mules, after the manner of mules, lunged once and then ceased pulling, and the rider who seemed familiar rode up with a torch and cursed. By the light of the torch I recognized him – one Abdullah Bey, a Persian noble high in the esteem of Muhammad Khan – a tall, lean man and a somber one, more Arab than Persian.

Now the leather curtains of the wagon parted and a girl looked out – I saw her young face by the flare of the torch. But Abdullah Bey thrust her back angrily and closed the curtains. Then he shouted to his men, a dozen of whom dismounted and put their shoulders to the wheel. With much grunting and cursing they lifted the wheel free, and soon the wagon lurched on again, and it and the horsemen faded and dwindled in my sight until all were shadows far out on the desert.

And I took up my journey again, wondering; for in the light of the torch I had seen the unveiled face of the girl in the wagon, and she was a Frank, and one of great beauty. What was the meaning of Seljuks on the road from Edessa, commanded by a Persian nobleman, and guarding a girl of the Nazarenes? I concluded that these Turks had captured her in a raid on Edessa or the kingdom of Jerusalem and were taking her to Kizilshehr or Shiraz to sell to some emir, and so dismissed the matter from my mind.

The bay was fresh and I had a mind to put a long way between me and the Persian army, so I rode slowly but steadily all night. And in the first white blaze of dawn, I met a horseman riding hard out of the west.

His steed was a long limbed roan that reeled from fatigue. The rider was an iron man – clad in close meshed mail from head to foot, with a heavy

vizorless helmet on his head. And I spurred my steed to a gallop for this was a Frank – and he was alone and on a tired horse.

He saw me coming and he cast his long lance into the sand and drew his sword, for he knew his steed was too weary to charge. And as I swooped down as a hawk swoops on its prey, I suddenly gave a shout and lowering my blade, set my steed back on his haunches, almost beside the Frank.

“Now by the beard of the Prophet,” said I, “we are well met, Sir Eric de Cogan!”

He gazed at me in surprize. He was no older than I, broad shouldered, long limbed and yellow haired. Now his face was haggard and weary as if he had ridden hard without sleep, but it was the face of a warrior, as his body was that of a warrior. I lack but an inch and a fraction of six feet in height as the Franks reckon a man’s stature, but Sir Eric was half a head taller.

“You know me,” said he, “but I do not remember you.”

“Ha!” quoth I, “we Saracens look all alike to you Franks! But I remember you, by Allah! Sir Eric, do you not remember the taking of Jerusalem and the Moslem boy you protected from your own warriors?”

Aye, I remembered! I was but a youth, newly come to Palestine, and I slipped through the besieging armies into the city the very dawn it fell. I was not used to street fighting. The noise, the shouting and the crashing of the shattered gates bewildered me, the dust and the foul smells of the strange city stifled me and maddened me. The Franks came over the walls and red Purgatory broke in the streets of Jerusalem. Their iron horsemen rode over the ruins of the gates and their horses tramped fetlock deep in blood. The Crusaders shouted hosannas and slew like blood-mad tigers and the mangled bodies of the Faithful choked the streets.

In a blind red whirl and chaos of destruction and delirium, I found myself slashing vainly against giants who seemed built of solid iron. Slipping in the filth of a blood-running gutter I hacked blindly in the dust and smoke and then the horsemen rode me down and trampled me. As I staggered up, bloody and dazed, a great bellowing monster of a man strode on foot out of the carnage swinging an iron mace. I had never fought Franks and did not then know the power of the terrible blows they deal in hand-to-hand fighting. In my youth and pride and inexperience I stood my ground and sought to match blows with the Frank, but that whistling mace shivered my

sword to bits, shattered my shoulder-bone and dashed me half dead into the blood-stained dust.

Then the giant bestrode me, and as he swung up his mace to dash out my brains, the bitterness of death took me by the throat. For I was young and in one blinding instant I saw again the sweet upland grass and the blue of the desert sky, and the tents of my tribe by the blue Oxus. Aye – life is sweet to the young.

Then out of the whirling smoke came another – a golden haired youth of my own age, but taller. His sword was red to the hilt, but his eyes were haunted. He cried out to the great Frank, and though I could not understand, I knew, vaguely, as one knows in a dream, that the youth asked that my life be spared – for his soul was sick with the slaughter. But the giant foamed at the mouth and roared like a beast, as he again raised his mace – and the youth leaped like a panther and thrust his long straight sword through his throat, so the giant fell down and died in the dust beside me.

Then the youth knelt at my side and made to staunch my wounds, speaking to me in halting Arabic. But I mumbled: “This is no place for a Chagatai to die. Set me on a horse and let me go. These walls shut out the sun and the dust of the streets chokes me. Let me die with the wind and the sun in my face.”

We were nigh the outer wall and all gates had been shattered. The youth caught one of the riderless horses which raced through the streets, and lifted me into the saddle. And I let the reins lie along the horse’s neck and he went from the city as an arrow goes from a bow, for he too was desert bred and he yearned for the open lands. I rode as a man rides in a dream, clinging to the saddle, and knowing only that the walls and the dust and the blood of the city no longer stifled me, and that I would die in the desert after all, which is the place for a Chagatai to die. And so I rode until all knowledge went from me.

II

Shall the grey wolf slink at the mastiff's heel?
Shall the ties of blood grow weak and dim? –
By smoke and slaughter, by fire and steel,
He is my brother – I ride with him.

Now as I gazed into the clear grey eyes of the Frank, all this came back to me and my heart was glad.

"What!" said he. "Are you that one whom I set on a horse and saw ride out of the city gate to die in the desert?"

"I am he – Kosru Malik," said I. "I did not die – we Turks are harder than cats to kill. The good steed, running at random, brought me into an Arab camp and they dressed my wounds and cared for me through the months I lay helpless of my wounds. Aye – I was more than half dead when you lifted me on the Arab horse, and the shrieks and red sights of the butchered city swam before me like a dim nightmare. But I remembered your face and the lion on your shield.

"When I might ride again, I asked men of the Frankish youth who bore the lion-shield and they told me it was Sir Eric de Cogan of that part of Frankistan that is called England, newly come to the East but already a knight. Ten years have passed since that crimson day, Sir Eric. Since then I have had fleeting glances of your shield gleaming like a star in the mist, in the forefront of battle, or glittering on the walls of towns we besieged, but until now I have not met you face to face.

"And my heart is glad for I would pay you the debt I owe you."

His face was shadowed. "Aye – I remember it all. You are in truth that youth. I was sick – sick – triply sick of bloodshed. The Crusaders went mad once they were within the walls. When I saw you, a lad of my own age, about to be butchered in cold blood by one I knew to be a brute and a vandal, a swine and a desecrator of the Cross he wore, my brain snapped."

"And you slew one of your own race to save a Saracen," said I. "Aye – my blade has drunk deep in Frankish blood since that day, my brother, but I can remember a friend as well as an enemy. Whither do you ride? To seek a vengeance? I will ride with you."

“I ride against your own people, Kosru Malik,” he warned.

“My people? Bah! Are Persians my people? The blood of a Kurd is scarcely dry on my scimitar. And I am no Seljuk.”

“Aye,” he agreed, “I have heard that you are a Chagatai.”

“Aye, so,” said I. “By the beard of the Prophet, on whom peace, Tashkend and Samarcand and Khiva and Bokhara are more to me than Trebizond and Shiraz and Antioch. You let blood of your breed to succor me – am I a dog that I should shirk my obligations? Nay, brother, I ride with thee!”

“Then turn your steed on the track you have come and let us be on,” he said, as one who is consumed with wild impatience. “I will tell you the whole tale, and a foul tale it is and one which I shame to tell, for the disgrace it puts on a man who wears the Cross of Holy Crusade.

“Know then, that in Edessa dwells one William de Brose, Seneschal to the Count of Edessa. To him lately has come from France his young niece Ettaire. Now harken, Kosru Malik, to the tale of man’s unspeakable infamy! The girl vanished and her uncle would give me no answer as to her whereabouts. In desperation I sought to gain entrance to his castle, which lies in the disputed land beyond Edessa’s south-eastern border, but was apprehended by a man-at-arms close in the council of de Brose. To this man I gave a death wound, and as he died, fearful of damnation, he gasped out the whole vile plot.

“William de Brose plots to wrest Edessa from his lord and to this end has received secret envoys from Muhammad Khan, sultan of Kizilshehr. The Persian has promised to come to the aid of the rebels when the time comes. Edessa will become part of the Kizilshehr sultanate and de Brose will rule there as a sort of satrap.

“Doubtless each plans to trick the other eventually – Muhammad demanded from de Brose a sign of good faith. And de Brose, the beast unspeakable, as a token of good will sends Ettaire to the sultan!”

Sir Eric’s iron hand was knotted in his horse’s mane and his eyes gleamed like a roused tiger’s.

“Such was the dying soldier’s tale,” he continued. “Already Ettaire had been sent away with an escort of Seljuks – with whom de Brose intrigues as well. Since I learned this I have ridden hard – by the saints, you would swear I lied were I to tell you how swiftly I have covered the long weary miles between this spot and Edessa! Days and nights have merged into one

dim maze, so I hardly remember myself how I have fed myself and my steed, how or when I have snatched brief moments of sleep, or how I have eluded or fought my way through hostile lands. This steed I took from a wandering Arab when my own fell from exhaustion – surely Ettaire and her captives cannot be far ahead of me."

I told him of the caravan I had seen in the night and he cried out with fierce eagerness but I caught his rein. "Wait, my brother," I said, "your steed is exhausted. Besides now the maid is already with Muhammad Khan."

Sir Eric groaned.

"But how can that be? Surely they cannot yet have reached Kizilshehr."

"They will come to Muhammad ere they come to Kizilshehr," I answered. "The sultan is out with his hawks and they are camped on the road to the city. I was in their camp last night."

Sir Eric's eyes were grim. "Then all the more reason for haste. Ettaire shall not bide in the clutches of the paynim while I live – "

"Wait!" I repeated. "Muhammad Khan will not harm her. He may keep her in the camp with him, or he may send her on to Kizilshehr. But for the time being she is safe. Muhammad is out on sterner business than love making. Have you wondered why he is encamped with his slayers?"

Sir Eric shook his head.

"I supposed the Kharesmians were moving against him."

"Nay, since Muhammad tore Kizilshehr from the empire, the Shah has not dared attack him, for he has turned Sunnite and claimed protection of the Caliphate. And for this reason many Seljuks and Kurds flock to him. He has high ambitions. He sees himself the Lion of Islam. And this is but the beginning. He may yet revive the powers of Islam with himself at the head.

"But now he waits the coming of Ali bin Sulieman, who has ridden up from Araby with five hundred desert hawks and swept a raid far into the borders of the sultanate. Ali is a thorn in Muhammad's flesh, but now he has the Arab in a trap. He has been outlawed by the Caliphs – if he rides to the west their warriors will cut him to pieces. A single rider, like yourself, might get through; not five hundred men. Ali must ride south to gain Arabia – and Muhammad is between with a thousand men. While the Arabs were looting and burning on the borders, the Persians cut in behind them with swift marches.

“Now let me venture to advise you, my brother. Your horse has done all he may, nor will it aid us or the girl to go riding into Muhammad’s camp and be cut down. But less than a league yonder lies a village where we can eat and rest our horses. Then when your steed is fit for the road again, we will ride to the Persian camp and steal the girl from under Muhammad’s nose.”

Sir Eric saw the wisdom of my words, though he chafed fiercely at the delay, as is the manner of Franks, who can endure any hardship but that of waiting and who have learned all things but patience.

But we rode to the village, a squalid, miserable cluster of huts, whose people had been oppressed by so many different conquerors that they no longer knew what blood they were. Seeing the unusual sight of Frank and Saracen riding together, they at once assumed that the two conquering nations had combined to plunder them. Such being the nature of humans, who would think it strange to see wolf and wildcat combine to loot the rabbit’s den.

When they realized we were not about to cut their throats they almost died of gratitude and immediately brought us of food their best – and sorry stuff it was – and cared for our steeds as we directed. As we ate we conversed; I had heard much of Sir Eric de Cogan, for his name is known to every man in Outremer, as the Franks call it, whether Caphar or Believer, and the name of Kosru Malik is not smoke for the wind to blow from men’s ears. He knew me by reputation though he had never linked the name with the lad he saved from his people when Jerusalem was sacked.

We had no difficulty in understanding each other now, for he spoke Turki like a Seljuk, and I had long learned the speech of the Franks, especially the tongue of those Franks who are called Normans. These are the leaders and the strongest of the Franks – the craftiest, fiercest and most cruel of all the Nazarenes. Of such was Sir Eric, though he differed from most of them in many ways. When I spoke of this he said it was because he was half Saxon. This people, he said, once ruled the isle of England, that lies west of Frankistan, and the Normans had come from a land called France, and conquered them, as the Seljuks conquered the Arabs, nearly half a century before. They had intermarried with the conquered, said Sir Eric, and he was the son of a Saxon princess and a knight who rode with William the Conqueror, the emir of the Normans.

He told me – and from weariness fell asleep in the telling – of the great battle which the Normans call Senlac and the Saxons Hastings, in which the emir William overcame his foes, and deeply did I wish that I had been there, for there is no fairer sight to me than to see Franks cutting each other’s throats.

III

Pent between tiger and wolf,
Only our lives to lose –
The dice will fall as the gods decide,
But who knows what may first betide?
And blind are all of the roads we ride –
Choose, then, my brother, choose!

As the sun dipped westward Sir Eric woke and cursed himself for his sloth; and we mounted and rode at a canter back along the way I had come, and over which the trail of the caravan was still to be seen. We went warily for it was in my mind that Muhammad Khan would have outriders to see that Ali bin Sulieman did not slip past him. And indeed, as dusk began to fall, we saw the last light of day glint on spear tips and steel caps to the north and west, but we went with care and escaped notice. At about midnight we came upon the site of the Persian camp but it was deserted and the tracks led south-eastward.

"Scouts have relayed word by signal smokes that Ali bin Sulieman is riding hard for Araby," said I. "And Muhammad has marched to cut him off. He is keeping well in touch with his foes."

"Why does the Persian ride with only a thousand men?" asked Sir Eric. "Two to one are no great odds against men like the Bedouins."

"To trap the Arab, speed is necessary," said I. "The sultan can shift his thousand riders as easily and swiftly as a chess player moves his piece. He has sent riders to harry Ali and herd him toward the route across which lies Muhammad with his thousand hard-bitten slayers. We have seen, far away, all evening, signal smokes hanging like serpents along the sky-line. Wherever the Arabs ride, men send up smoke, and these smokes are seen by other scouts far away, who likewise send up smoke that may be seen by Muhammad's outriders."

Sir Eric had been searching among the tracks with flint, steel and tinder, and now he announced: "Here is the track of Ettaire's wagon. See – the left hind wheel has been broken at some time and mended with rawhide – the mark in the tracks shows plainly. The stars give light enough to show if a

wagon turns off from the rest. Muhammad may keep the girl with him, or he may send her on to his harem at Kizilshehr."

So we rode on swiftly, keeping good watch, and no wagon train turned off. From time to time Sir Eric dismounted and sought with flint and steel until he found the mark of the hide-bound wheel again. So we progressed and just before the darkness that precedes dawn, we came to the camp of Muhammad Khan which lay in a wide reach of level desert land at the foot of a jagged tangle of bare, gully torn hills.

At first I thought the thousand of Muhammad had become a mighty host, for many fires blazed on the plain, straggling in a vast half circle. The warriors were wide awake, many of them, and we could hear them singing and shouting as they feasted and whetted their scimitars and strung their bows. From the darkness that hid us from their eyes, we could make out the bulks of steeds standing nearby in readiness and many riders went to and fro between the fires for no apparent reason.

"They have Ali bin Sulieman in a trap," I muttered. "All this show is to fool scouts – a man watching from those hills would swear ten thousand warriors camped here. They fear he might try to break through in the night."

"But where are the Arabs?"

I shook my head in doubt. The hills beyond the plain loomed dark and silent. No single gleam betrayed a fire among them. At that point the hills jutted far out into the plains and none could ride down from them without being seen.

"It must be that scouts have reported Ali is riding hither, through the night," said Sir Eric. "And they wait to cut him off. But look! That tent – the only one pitched in camp – is that not Muhammad's? They have not put up the tents of the emirs because they feared a sudden attack. The warriors keep watch or sleep beneath the wagons. And look – that smaller fire which flickers furthest from the hills, somewhat apart from the rest. A wagon stands beside it, and would not the sultan place Ettaire furthest from the direction in which the enemy comes? Let us see to that wagon."

So the first step in the madness was taken. On the western side the plain was broken with many deep ravines. In one of these we left our horses and in the deepening darkness stole forward on foot. Allah willed it that we should not be ridden down by any of the horsemen who constantly patrolled the plain, and presently it came to pass that we lay on our bellies a hundred

paces from the wagon, which I now recognized as indeed the one I had passed the night before.

“Remain here,” I whispered. “I have a plan. Bide here, and if you hear a sudden outcry or see me attacked, flee, for you can do no good by remaining.”

He cursed me beneath his breath as is the custom of Franks when a sensible course is suggested to them, but when I swiftly whispered my plan, he grudgingly agreed to let me try it.

So I crawled away for a few yards, then rose and walked boldly to the wagon. One warrior stood on guard, with shield and drawn scimitar, and I hoped it was one of the Seljuks who had brought the girl, since if it were so, he might not know me, or that my life was forfeit in the camp. But when I approached I saw that though indeed a Turk, he was a warrior of the sultan’s own body-guard. But he had already seen me, so I walked boldly up to him, seeking to keep my face turned from the fire.

“The sultan bids me bring the girl to his tent,” I said gruffly, and the Seljuk glared at me uncertainly.

“What talk is this?” he growled. “When her caravan arrived at the camp, the sultan took time only to glance at her, for much was afoot, and word had come of the movements of the Arab dogs. Earlier in the night he had her before him, but sent her away, saying her kisses would taste sweeter after the dry fury of battle. Well meseemeth he is sorely smitten with the infidel hussy, but is it likely he would break the sleep he snatches now – ”

“Would you argue with the royal order?” I asked impatiently. “Do you burn to sit on a stake, or yearn to have your hide flayed from you? Harken and obey!”

But his suspicions were aroused. Just as I thought him about to step back and wake the girl, like a flash he caught my shoulder and swung me around so that the firelight shone full on my face.

“Ha!” he barked like a jackal, “Kosru Malik – !”

His blade was already glittering above my head. I caught his arm with my left hand and his throat with my right, strangling the yell in his gullet. We plunged to earth together, and wrestled and tore like a pair of peasants, and his eyes were starting from his head, when he drove his knee into my groin. The sudden pain made me relax my grip for an instant, and he ripped his sword-arm free and the blade shot for my throat like a gleam of light. But in that instant there was a sound like an axe driven deep into a tree-

trunk, the Seljuk's whole frame jerked convulsively, blood and brains spattered in my face and the scimitar fell harmlessly on my mailed chest. Sir Eric had come up while we fought and seeing my peril, split the warrior's skull with a single blow of his long straight sword.

I rose, drawing my scimitar and looked about; the warriors still revelled by the fires a bow-shot away; seemingly no one had heard or seen that short fierce fight in the shadow of the wagon.

"Swift! The girl, Sir Eric!" I hissed, and stepping quickly to the wagon he drew aside the curtain and said softly: "Ettaire!"

She had been wakened by the struggle and I heard a low cry of joy and love as two white arms went about Sir Eric's mailed neck and over his shoulder I saw the face of the girl I had passed on the road to Edessa.

They whispered swiftly to one another and then he lifted her out and set her gently down. Allah – little more than a child she was, as I could see by the firelight – slim and frail, with deep eyes, grey like Sir Eric's, but soft instead of cold and steely. Comely enough, though a trifle slight to my way of thinking. When she saw the firelight on my dark face and drawn scimitar she cried out sharply and shrank back against Sir Eric, but he soothed her.

"Be not afraid, child," said he. "This is our good friend, Kosru Malik, the Chagatai. Let us go swiftly; any moment sentries may ride past this fire."

Her slippers were soft and she but little used to treading the desert. Sir Eric bore her like a child in his mighty arms as we stole back to the ravine where we had left the horses. It was the will of Allah that we reached them

without mishap, but even as we rode up out of the ravine, the Frank holding Ettaire before him, we heard the rattle of hoofs hard by.

“Ride for the hills,” muttered Sir Eric. “There is a large band of riders close at our heels, doubtless reinforcements. If we turn back we will ride into them. Perchance we can reach the hills before dawn breaks, then we can turn back the way we wish to go.”

So we trotted out on the plain in the last darkness before dawn, made still darker by a thick, clammy fog, with the tramp of hoofs and the jingle of armor and reins close at our heels. I did not think they were reinforcements but a band of scouts, since they did not turn in to the fires but made straight out across the levels toward the hills, driving us before them, though they knew it not. Surely, I thought, Muhammad knows that hostile eyes are on him, hence this milling to and fro of riders to give an impression of great numbers.

The hoofs dwindled behind us as the scouts turned aside or rode back to the lines. The plain was alive with small groups of horsemen who rode to and fro like ghosts in the deep darkness. On each side we heard the stamp of their horses and the rattle of their arms. Tenseness gripped us. Already there was a hint of dawn in the sky, though the heavy fog veiled all. In the darkness the riders mistook us for their comrades, so far, but quickly the early light would betray us.

Once a band of horsemen swung close and hailed us; I answered quickly in Turki and they reined away, satisfied. There were many Seljuks in Muhammad’s army, yet had they come a pace closer they would have made out Sir Eric’s stature and Frankish apparel. As it was the darkness and the mists clumped all objects into shadowy masses, for the stars were dimmed and the sun was not yet.

Then the noises were all behind us, the mists thinned in light that flowed suddenly across the hills in a white tide, stars vanished and the vague shadows about us took the forms of ravines, boulders and cactus. Then it was full dawn but we were among the defiles, out of sight of the plains, which were still veiled in the mists that had forsaken the higher levels.

Sir Eric tilted up the white face of the girl and kissed her tenderly.

“Ettaire,” said he, “we are encompassed by foes, but now my heart is light.”

“And mine, my lord!” she answered, clinging to him. “I knew you would come! Oh, Eric, did the pagan lord speak truth when he said mine own

uncle gave me into slavery?”

“I fear so, little Ettaire,” said he gently. “His heart is blacker than night.”

“What was Muhammad’s word to you?” I broke in.

“When I was first taken to him, upon reaching the Moslem camp,” she answered, “there was much confusion and haste, for the infidels were breaking camp and preparing to march. The sultan looked on me and spake kindly to me, bidding me not fear. When I begged to be sent back to my uncle, he told me I was a gift from my uncle. Then he gave orders that I be given tender care and rode on with his generals. I was put back in the wagon and thereafter stayed there, sleeping a little, until early last night when I was again taken to the sultan. He talked with me a space and offered me no indignity, though his talk frightened me. For his eyes glowed fiercely on me, and he swore he would make me his queen – that he would build a pyramid of skulls in my honor and fling the turbans of shahs and caliphs at my feet. But he sent me back to my wagon, saying that when he next came to me, he would bring the head of Ali bin Sulieman for a bridal gift.”

“I like it not,” said I uneasily. “This is madness – the talk of a Tatar chief rather than that of a civilized Moslem ruler. If Muhammad has been fired with love for you, he will move all Hell to take you.”

“Nay,” said Sir Eric, “I – ”

And at that moment a half score of ragged figures leaped from the rocks and seized our reins. Ettaire screamed and I made to draw my scimitar; it is not meet that a dog of the Bedoui seize thus the rein of a son of Turan. But Sir Eric caught my arm. His own sword was in its sheath, but he made no move to draw it, speaking instead in sonorous Arabic, as a man speaks who expects to be obeyed: “We are well met, children of the tents; lead us therefore, to Ali bin Sulieman whom we seek.”

At this the Arabs were taken somewhat aback and they gazed at each other.

“Cut them down,” growled one. “They are Muhammad’s spies.”

“Aye,” gibed Sir Eric, “spies ever carry their women-folk with them. Fools! We have ridden hard to find Ali bin Sulieman. If you hinder us, your hides will answer. Lead us to your chief.”

“Aye,” snarled one they called Yurzed, who seemed to be a sort of beg or lesser chief among them, “Ali bin Sulieman knows how to deal with spies. We will take you to him, as sheep are taken to the butcher. Give up thy swords, sons of evil!”

Sir Eric nodded to my glance, drawing his own long blade and delivering it hilt first.

“Even this was to come to pass,” said I bitterly. “Lo, I eat dust – take my hilt, dog – would it was the point I was passing through thy ribs.”

Yurzed grinned like a wolf. “Be at ease, Turk – time thy steel learnt the feel of a man’s hand.”

“Handle it carefully,” I snarled. “I swear, when it comes back into my hands I will bathe it in swine’s blood to cleanse it of the pollution of thy filthy fingers.”

I thought the veins in his forehead would burst with fury, but with a howl of rage, he turned his back on us, and we perforce followed him, with his ragged wolves holding tight to our reins.

I saw Sir Eric’s plan, though we dared not speak to each other. There was no doubt but that the hills swarmed with Bedouins. To seek to hack our way through them were madness. If we joined forces with them, we had a chance to live, scant though it was. If not – well, these dogs love a Turk little and a Frank none.

On all sides we caught glimpses of hairy men in dirty garments, watching us from behind rocks or from among ravines, with hard, hawk-like eyes; and presently we came to a sort of natural basin where some five hundred splendid Arab steeds sought the scanty grass that straggled there. My very mouth watered. By Allah, these Bedoui be dogs and sons of dogs, but they breed good horse flesh!

A hundred or so warriors watched the horses – tall, lean men, hard as the desert that bred them, with steel caps, round bucklers, mail shirts, long sabers and lances. No sign of fire was seen and the men looked worn and evil as with hunger and hard riding. Little loot had they of that raid! Somewhat apart from them on a sort of knoll sat a group of older warriors and there our captors led us.

Ali bin Sulieman we knew at once; like all his race he was tall and wide shouldered, tall as Sir Eric but lacking the Frank’s massiveness, built with the savage economy of a desert wolf. His eyes were piercing and menacing, his face lean and cruel. Sir Eric did not wait for him to speak: “Ali bin Sulieman,” said the Frank, “we have brought you two good swords.”

Ali bin Sulieman snarled as if Sir Eric had suggested cutting his throat.

“What is this?” he snapped, and Yurzed spake, saying: “These Franks and this dog of a Turk we found in the fringe of the hills, just at the lifting of

dawn. They came from toward the Persian camp. Be on your guard, Ali bin Sulieman; Franks are crafty in speech, and this Turk is no Seljuk, meseemeth, but some devil from the East."

"Aye," Ali grinned ferociously, "we have notables among us! The Turk is Kosru Malik the Chagatai, whose trail the ravens follow. And unless I am mad, that shield is the shield of Sir Eric de Cogan."

"Trust them not," urged Yurzed. "Let us throw their heads to the Persian dogs."

Sir Eric laughed and his eyes grew cold and hard as is the manner of Franks when they stare into the naked face of Doom.

"Many shall die first, though our swords be taken from us," quoth he. "And, chief of the desert, ye have no men to waste. Soon ye will need all the swords ye have and they may not suffice. You are in a trap."

Ali tugged at his beard and his eyes were evil and fearful.

"If ye be a true man, tell me whose host is that upon the plain."

"That is the army of Muhammad Khan, sultan of Kizilshehr."

Those about Ali cried out mockingly and angrily and Ali cursed.

"You lie! Muhammad's wolves have harried us for a day and a night. They have hung at our flanks like jackals dogging a wounded stag. At dusk we turned on them and scattered them; then when we rode into the hills, lo, on the other side we saw a great host encamped. How can that be Muhammad?"

"Those who harried you were no more than outriders," replied Sir Eric, "light cavalry sent by Muhammad to hang on your flanks and herd you into his trap like so many cattle. The country is up behind you; you cannot turn back. Nay, the only way is through the Persian ranks."

"Aye, so," said Ali with bitter irony. "Now I know you speak like a friend; shall five hundred men cut their way through ten thousand?"

Sir Eric laughed. "The mists of morning still veil yon plain. Let them rise and you will see no more than a thousand men."

"He lies," broke in Yurzed, for whom I was beginning to cherish a hearty dislike. "All night the plain was full of the tramp of horsemen and we saw the blaze of a hundred fires."

"To trick you," said Sir Eric, "to make you believe you looked on a great army. The horsemen rode the plain, partly to create the impression of vast numbers, partly to prevent scouts from slipping too close to the fires. You

have to deal with a master at stratagems. When did you come into these hills?”

“Somewhat after dark, last night,” said Ali.

“And Muhammad arrived at dusk. Did you not see the signal smokes behind and about you as you rode? They were lighted by scouts to reveal to Muhammad your movements. He timed his march perfectly and arrived in time to build his fires and catch you in his trap. You might have ridden through them last night, and many escaped. Now you must fight by daylight and I have no doubt but that more Persians are riding this way. See, the mist clears; come with me to yon eminence and I will show you I speak truth.”

The mist indeed had cleared from the plain, and Ali cursed as he looked down on the wide flung camp of the Persians, who were beginning to tighten cinch and armor strap, and see to their weapons, judging from the turmoil in camp.

“Trapped and tricked,” he cursed. “And my own men growl behind my back. There is no water nor much grass in these hills. So close those cursed Kurds pressed us, that we, who thought them the vanguard of Muhammad’s army, have had no time to rest or eat for a day and a night. We have not even built fires for lack of aught to cook. What of the five hundred outriders we scattered at dusk, Sir Eric? They fled at the first charge, the crafty dogs.”

“No doubt they have reformed and lurk somewhere in your rear,” said Sir Eric. “Best that we mount and strike the Persians swiftly, before the heat of the growing day weakens your hungry men. If those Kurds come in behind us, we are caught in the nut cracker.”

Ali nodded and gnawed his beard, as one lost in deep thought. Suddenly he spake: “Why do you tell me this? Why join yourselves to the weaker side? What guile brought you into my camp?”

Sir Eric shrugged his shoulders. “We are fleeing Muhammad. This girl is my betrothed, whom one of his emirs stole from me. If they catch us, our lives are forfeit.”

Thus he spake, not daring to divulge the fact that it was Muhammad himself who desired the girl, nor that she was the niece of William de Brose, lest Ali buy peace from the Persian by handing us over to him.

The Arab nodded absently, but he seemed well pleased. “Give them back their swords,” said he. “I have heard that Sir Eric de Cogan keeps his word. We will take the Turk on trust.”

So Yurzed reluctantly gave us back our blades. Sir Eric's weapon was a true Crusader's sword – long, heavy and double edged, with a wide cross guard. Mine was a scimitar forged beyond the Oxus – the hilt set in jewels, the blade of fine blue steel of goodly length, not too curved for thrusting nor too straight for slashing, not too heavy for swift and cunning work yet not too light for mighty blows.

Sir Eric drew the girl aside and said softly: "Ettaire, God knows what is best. It may be that you and I and Kosru Malik die here. We must fight the Persians and God alone knows what the outcome may be. But any other course had cut our throats."

"Come what may, my dear lord," said she with her soul shining in her eyes, "if it find me by your side, I am content."

"What manner of warriors are these Bedoui, my brother?" asked Sir Eric.

"They are fierce fighters," I answered, "but they will not stand. One of them in single combat is a match for a Turk and more than a match for a Kurd or a Persian, but the melee of a serried field is another matter. They will charge like a blinding blast from the desert and if the Persians break and the smell of victory touches the Arabs' nostrils, they will be irresistible. But if Muhammad holds firm and withstands their first onslaught, then you and I had better break away and ride, for these men are hawks who give over if they miss their prey at the first swoop."

"But will the Persians stand?" asked Sir Eric.

"My brother," said I, "I have no love for these Irani. They are called cowards, sometimes; but a Persian will fight like a blood-maddened devil when he trusts his leader. Too many false chiefs have disgraced the ranks of Persia. Who wishes to die for a sultan who betrays his men? The Persians will stand; they trust Muhammad and there are many Turks and Kurds to stiffen the ranks. We must strike them hard and shear straight through."

The hawks were gathering from the hills, assembling in the basin and saddling their steeds. Ali bin Sulieman came striding over to where we sat and stood glowering down at us. "What thing do ye discuss amongst yourselves?"

Sir Eric rose, meeting the Arab eye to eye. "This girl is my betrothed, stolen from me by Muhammad's men, and stolen back again by me, as I told you. Now I am hard put to find a place of safety for her. We cannot leave her in the hills; we cannot take her with us when we ride down into the plains."

Ali looked at the girl as if he had seen her for the first time, and I saw lust for her born in his eyes. Aye, her white face was a spark to fire men's hearts.

"Dress her as a boy," he suggested. "I will put a warrior to guard her, and give her a horse. When we charge, she shall ride in the rear ranks, falling behind. When we engage the Irani, let her ride like the wind and circle the Persian camp if she may, and flee southward – toward Araby. If she is swift and bold she may win free, and her guard will cut down any stragglers who may seek to stop her. But with the whole Iranian host engaged with us, it is not likely that two horsemen fleeing the battle will be noticed."

Ettaire turned white when this was explained to her, and Sir Eric shuddered. It was indeed a desperate chance, but the only one. Sir Eric asked that I be allowed to be her guard, but Ali answered that he could spare another man better – doubtless he distrusted me, even if he trusted Sir Eric, and feared I might steal the girl for myself. He would agree to naught else, but that we both ride at his side, and we could but agree. As for me, I was glad; I, a hawk of the Chagatai, to be a woman's watch-dog when a battle was forward! A youth named Yussef was detailed for the duty and Ali gave the girl a fine black mare. Clad in Arabian garments, she did in sooth look like a slim young Arab, and Ali's eyes burned as he looked on her. I knew that did we break through the Persians, we would still have the Arab to fight if we kept the girl.

The Bedouins were mounted and restless. Sir Eric kissed Ettaire, who wept and clung to him, then he saw that she was placed well behind the last rank, with Yussef at her side, and he and I took our places beside Ali bin Sulieman. We trotted swiftly through the ravines and debouched upon the broken hillsides.

There is no God but God! With the early morning sun blazing on the eastern hills we thundered down the defiles and swept out on to the plain where the Persian army had just formed. By Allah, I will remember that charge when I lie dying! We rode like men who ride to feast with Death, with our blades in hands and the wind in our teeth and the reins flying free.

And like a blast from Hell we smote the Persian ranks which reeled to the shock. Our howling fiends slashed and hacked like madmen and the Kizilshehri went down before them like garnered grain. Their saber-play was too swift and desperate for the eye to follow – like the flickering of summer lightning. I swear that a hundred Persians died in the instant of

impact when the lines met and our flying squadron hacked straight into the heart of the Persian host. There the ranks stiffened and held, though sorely beset, and the clash of steel rose to the skies. We had lost sight of Ettaire and there was no time to look for her; her fate lay in the lap of Allah.

I saw Muhammad Khan sitting his great white stallion in the midst of his emirs as coolly as if he watched a parade – yet the flickering blades of our screaming devils were a scant spear-cast from him. His lords thronged about him – Kai Kedra, the Seljuk, Abdullah Bey, Mirza Khan, Dost Said, Mechmet Atabeg, Ahmed El Ghor, himself an Arab, and Yar Akbar, a hairy giant of a renegade Afghan, accounted the strongest man in Kizilshehr.

Sir Eric and I hewed our way through the lines, shoulder to shoulder, and I swear by the Prophet, we left only empty saddles behind us. Aye, our steeds' hoofs trod headless corpses! Yet somehow Ali bin Sulieman won through to the emirs before us. Yurzed was close at his heels, but Mirza Khan cut off his head with a single stroke and the emirs closed about Ali bin Sulieman who yelled like a blood-mad panther and stood up in his stirrups, smiting like a mad-man.

Three Persian men-at-arms he slew, and he dealt Mirza Khan such a blow that it stunned and unhorsed him, though his helmet saved the Persian's brain. Abdullah Bey reined in from behind and thrust his scimitar point through the Arab's mail and deep into his back, and Ali reeled, but ceased not to ply his long saber.

By this time Sir Eric and I had hacked a way to his side. Sir Eric rose in his saddle and, shouting the Frankish war-cry, dealt Abdullah Bey such a stroke that helmet and skull shattered together and the emir went headlong from his saddle. Ali bin Sulieman laughed fiercely and though at this instant Dost Said hewed through mail-shirt and shoulder-bone, he spurred his steed headlong into the press. The great horse screamed and reared, and leaning downward, Ali sheared through the neck cords of Dost Said, and lunged at Muhammad Khan through the melee. But he overreached as he struck and Kai Kedra gave him his death stroke.

A great cry went up from the hosts, Arabs and Persians, who had seen the deed, and I felt the whole Arabian line give and slacken. I thought it was because Ali bin Sulieman had fallen, but then I heard a great shouting on the flanks and above the din of carnage, the drum of galloping hoofs. Mechmet Atabeg was pressing me close and I had no time to snatch a glance. But I felt the Arab lines melting and crumbling away, and mad to

see what was forward, I took a desperate chance, matching my quickness against the quickness of Mechmet Atabeg and killed him. Then I chanced a swift look. From the north, down from the hills we had just quitted thundered a squadron of hawk-faced men – the Kurds that had been following the Roualli.

At that sight the Arabs broke and scattered like a flight of birds. It was every man for himself and the Persians cut them down as they ran. In a trice the battle changed from a close locked struggle to a loose maze of flight and single combats that streamed out over the plain. Our charge had carried Sir Eric and me deep into the heart of the Persian host. Now when the Kizilshehrians broke away to pursue their foes, it left but a thin line between us and the open desert to the south.

We struck in the spurs and burst through. Far ahead of us we saw two horsemen riding hard, and one rode the tall black mare the Arabs had given Ettaire. She and her guard had won through, but the plain was alive with horsemen who flew and horsemen who pursued.

We fled after Ettaire and as we swept past the group that guarded Muhammad Khan, we came so close that I saw the boldness and fearlessness of his brown eyes. Aye – there I looked on the face of a born king.

Men opposed us and men pursued us, but they who followed were left behind and they who barred our way died. Nay, the slayers soon turned to easier prey – the flying Arabs.

So we passed over the battle-strewn plain and we saw Ettaire rein in her mount and gaze back toward the field of battle, while Yussef strove to urge her on. But she must have seen us, for she threw up her arm – and then a band of Kurds swept down on them from the side – camp-followers, jackals who followed Muhammad for loot. We heard a scream and saw the swift flicker of steel, and Sir Eric groaned and rowelled his steed until it screamed and leaped madly ahead of my bay, and we swept up on the struggling group.

The Arab Yussef had wrought well; from one Kurd had he struck off the left arm at the shoulder, and he had broken his scimitar in the breast of another. Now as we rode up his horse went down, but as he fell, the Arab dragged a Kurd out of the saddle and rolling about on the ground, they butchered each other with their curved daggers.

The other Kurds, by some chance, had pulled Ettaire down, instead of slashing off her head, thinking her to be a boy. Now as they tore her garments and exposed her face in their roughness, they saw she was a girl and fair, and they howled like wolves. And as they howled, we smote them.

By the Prophet, a madness was over Sir Eric; his eyes blazed terribly from a face white as death, and his strength was beyond that of mortal man. Three Kurds he slew with three blows and the rest cried out and gave way, screaming that a devil was among them. And in fleeing one passed too near me and I cut off his head to teach him manners.

And now Sir Eric was off his horse and had gathered the terrified girl in his arms, while I looked to Yussef and the Kurd and found them both dead. And I discovered another thing – I had a lance thrust in my thigh, and how or when I received it, I know not for the fire of battle makes men insensible to wounds. I staunched the blood and bound it up as best I could with strips torn from my garments.

“Haste in the name of Allah!” said I to Sir Eric with some irritation, as it seemed he would fondle the girl and whisper pet names to her all morning. “We may be set upon any moment. Set the woman on her horse and let us begone. Save your love-making for a more opportune time.”

“Kosru Malik,” said Sir Eric, as he did as I advised, “you are a firm friend and a mighty fighter, but have you ever loved?”

“A thousand times,” said I. “I have been true to half the women in Samarcand. Mount, in God’s name, and let us ride!”

IV

> I gasped, “A kingdom waits my lord, her love is but her own,
> A day shall mar, a day shall cure for her, but what of thee?
> Cut loose the girl – he follows fast – cut loose and ride alone!”
> Then Scindhia ’twixt his blistered lips: “My queens’ queen shall she be!”
>
> – Kipling

And so we rode out of that shambles and to avoid any stray bands of pillagers – for all the countryside rises when a battle is fought and they care not whom they rob – we rode south and a little east, intending to swing back toward westward when we had put a goodly number of leagues between us and the victorious Kizilshehri.

We rode until past the noon hour when we found a spring and halted there to rest the horses and to drink. A little grass grew there but of food for ourselves we had none and neither Sir Eric nor I had eaten since the day before, nor slept in two nights. But we dared not sleep with the hawks of war on the wing and none too far away, though Sir Eric made the girl lie down in the shade of a straggling tamarisk and snatch a small nap.

An hour’s rest and we rode on again, slowly, to save the horses. Again, as the sun slanted westward we paused awhile in the shade of some huge rocks and rested again, and this time Sir Eric and I took turn at sleeping, and though neither of us slept over half an hour, it refreshed us marvelously. Again we took up the trail, swinging in a wide arc to westward.

It was almost nightfall when I began to realize the madness that had fallen on Muhammad Khan. There came to me the strange restless feeling all desert-bred men know – the sensation of pursuit. Dismounting I laid my ear to the ground. Aye, many horsemen were riding hard, though still far away. I told Sir Eric and we hastened our pace, thinking it perhaps a band of fleeing Arabs.

We swung back to the east again, to avoid them, but when dusk had fallen, I listened to the ground again and again caught the faint vibration of many hoofs.

“Many riders,” I muttered. “By Allah, Sir Eric, we are being hunted.”

“Is it us they pursue?” asked Sir Eric.

“Who else?” I made answer. “They follow our trail as hunting-dogs follow a wounded wolf. Sir Eric, Muhammad is mad. He lusts after the maid, fool that he is, to thus risk throwing away an empire for a puling girl-child. Sir Eric, women are more plentiful than sparrows, but warriors like thyself are few. Let Muhammad have the girl. ’Twere no disgrace – a whole army hunts us.”

His jaw set like iron and he said only: “Ride away and save thyself.”

“By the blood of Allah,” said I softly, “none but thou could use those words to me and live.”

He shook his head. “I meant no insult by them, my brother; no need for thou too to die.”

“Spur up the horses, in God’s name,” I said wearily. “All Franks are mad.”

And so we rode on through the gathering twilight, into the light of the stars, and all the while far behind us vibrated the faint but steady drum of many hoofs. Muhammad had settled to a steady grinding gait, I believed, and I knew he would gain slowly on us for his steeds were the less weary. How he learned of our flight, I never knew. Perhaps the Kurds who escaped Sir Eric’s fury brought him word of us; perhaps a tortured Arab told him.

Thinking to elude him, we swung far to the east and just before dawn I no longer caught the vibration of the hoofs. But I knew our respite was short; he had lost our trail but he had Kurds in his ranks who could track a wolf across bare rocks. Muhammad would have us ere another sun set.

At dawn we topped a rise and saw before us, spreading to the sky-line, the calm waters of the Green Sea – the Persian Gulf. Our steeds were done; they staggered and tossed their heads, legs wide braced. In the light of dawn I saw my comrades’ drawn and haggard faces. The girl’s eyes were shadowed and she reeled with weariness though she spoke no word of complaint. As for me, with a single half hour’s sleep for three nights, all seemed dim and like a dream at times till I shook myself into wakefulness. But Sir Eric was iron, brain and spirit and body. An inner fire drove him and spurred him on, and his soul blazed so brightly that it overcame the weakness and weariness of his body. Aye, but it is a hard road, the road of Azrael!

We came upon the shores of the sea, leading our stumbling mounts. On the Arab side the shores of the Green Sea are level and sandy, but on the

Persian side they are high and rocky. Many broken boulders lined the steep shores so that the steeds had much ado to pick their way among them.

Sir Eric found a nook between two great boulders and bade the girl sleep a little, while I remained by her to keep watch. He himself would go along the shore and see if he might find a fisher's boat, for it was his intention that we should go out on the face of the sea in an effort to escape the Persians. He strode away among the rocks, straight and tall and very gallant in appearance, with the early light glinting on his armor.

The girl slept the sleep of utter exhaustion and I sat nearby with my scimitar across my knees, and pondered the madness of Franks and sultans. My leg was sore and stiff from the spear thrust, I was athirst and dizzy for sleep and from hunger, and saw naught but death for all ahead.

At last I found myself sinking into slumber in spite of myself, so, the girl being fast asleep, I rose and limped about, that the pain of my wound might keep me awake. I made my way about a shoulder of the cliff a short distance away – and a strange thing came suddenly to pass.

One moment I was alone among the rocks, the next instant a huge warrior had leaped from behind them. I knew in a flashing instant that he was some sort of a Frank, for his eyes were light and they blazed like a tiger's, and his skin was very white, while from under his helmet flowed flaxen locks. Flaxen, likewise, was his thick beard, and from his helmet branched the horns of a bull so at first glance I thought him some fantastic demon of the wilderness.

All this I perceived in an instant as with a deafening roar, the giant rushed upon me, swinging a heavy, flaring edged axe in his right hand. I should have leaped aside, smiting as he missed, as I had done against a hundred Franks before. But the fog of half-sleep was on me and my wounded leg was stiff.

I caught his swinging axe on my buckler and my forearm snapped like a twig. The force of that terrific stroke dashed me earthward, but I caught myself on one knee and thrust upward, just as the Frank loomed above me. My scimitar point caught him beneath the beard and rent his jugular; yet even so, staggering drunkenly and spurting blood, he gripped his axe with both hands, and with legs wide braced, heaved the axe high above his head. But life went from him ere he could strike.

Then as I rose, fully awake now from the pain of my broken arm, men came from the rocks on all sides and made a ring of gleaming steel about

me. Such men I had never seen. Like him I had slain, they were tall and massive with red or yellow hair and beards and fierce light eyes. But they were not clad in mail from head to foot like the Crusaders. They wore horned helmets and shirts of scale mail which came almost to their knees but left their throats and arms bare, and most of them wore no other armor at all. They held on their left arms heavy kite shaped shields, and in their right hands wide edged axes. Many wore heavy golden armlets, and chains of gold about their necks.

Surely such men had never before trod the sands of the East. There stood before them, as a chief stands, a very tall Frank whose hauberk was of silvered scales. His helmet was wrought with rare skill and instead of an axe he bore a long heavy sword in a richly worked sheath. His face was as a man that dreams, but his strange light eyes were wayward as the gleams of the sea.

Beside him stood another, stranger than he; this man was very old, with a wild white beard and white elf locks. Yet his giant frame was unbowed and his thews were as oak and iron. Only one eye he had and it held a strange gleam, scarcely human. Aye, he seemed to reckon little of what went about him, for his lion-like head was lifted and his strange eye stared through and beyond that on which it rested, into the deeps of the world's horizons.

Now I saw that the end of the road was come for me. I flung down my scimitar and folded my arms.

"God gives," said I, and waited for the stroke.

And then there sounded a swift clank of armor and the warriors whirled as Sir Eric burst roughly through the ring and faced them. Thereat a sullen roar went up and they pressed forward. I caught up my scimitar to stand at Sir Eric's back, but the tall Frank in the silvered mail raised his hand and spoke in a strange tongue, whereat all fell silent. Sir Eric answered in his own tongue: "I cannot understand Norse. Can any of you speak English or Norman-French?"

"Aye," answered the tall Frank whose height was half a head more than Sir Eric's. "I am Skel Thorwald's son, of Norway, and these are my wolves. This Saracen has slain one of my carles. Is he your friend?"

"Friend and brother-at-arms," said Sir Eric. "If he slew, he had just reason."

"He sprang on me like a tiger from ambush," said I wearily. "They are your breed, brother. Let them take my head if they will; blood must pay for

blood. Then they will save you and the girl from Muhammad."

"Am I a dog?" growled Sir Eric, and to the warriors he said: "Look at your wolf; think you he struck a blow after his throat was cut? Yet here is Kosru Malik with a broken arm. Your wolf smote first; a man may defend his life."

"Take him then, and go your ways," said Skel Thorwald's son slowly. "We would not take an unfair advantage of the odds, but I like not your pagan."

"Wait!" exclaimed Sir Eric. "I ask your aid! We are hunted by a Moslem lord as wolves hunt deer. He seeks to drag a Christian girl into his harem – "

"Christian!" rumbled Skel Thorwald's son. "But ten days agone I slew a horse to Thor."

I saw a slow desperation grow in Sir Eric's deep-lined face.

"I thought even you Norse had forsaken your pagan gods," said he. "But let it rest – if there be manhood among ye, aid us, not for my sake nor the sake of my friend, but for the sake of the girl who sleeps among those rocks."

At that from among the rest thrust himself a warrior my height and of mighty build. More than fifty winters he had known, yet his red hair and beard were untouched by grey, and his blue eyes blazed as if a constant rage flamed in his soul.

"Aye!" he snarled. "Aid ye ask, you Norman dog! You, whose breed overran the heritage of my people – whose kinsmen rode fetlock deep in good Saxon blood – now you howl for aid and succor like a trapped jackal in this naked land. I will see you in Hell before I lift axe to defend you or yours."

"Nay, Hrothgar," the ancient white bearded giant spoke for the first time and his voice was like the call of a deep throated trumpet. "This knight is alone among we many. Entreat him not harshly."

Hrothgar seemed abashed, angry, yet wishful to please the old one.

"Aye, my king," he muttered half sullenly, half apologetically.

Sir Eric started: "King?"

"Aye!" Hrothgar's eyes blazed anew; in truth he was a man of constant spleen. "Aye – the monarch your cursed William tricked and trapped, and beat by a trick to cast from his throne. There stands Harold, the son of Godwin, rightful king of England!"

Sir Eric doffed his helmet, staring as if at a ghost.

“But I do not understand,” he stammered. “Harold fell at Senlac – Edith Swan-necked found him among the slain – ”

Hrothgar snarled like a wounded wolf, while his eyes flamed and flickered with blue lights of hate.

“A trick to cozen tricksters,” he snarled. “That was an unknown chief of the west Edith showed to the priests. I, a lad of ten, was among those that bore King Harold from the field by night, senseless and blinded.”

His fierce eyes grew gentler and his rough voice strangely soft.

“We bore him beyond the reach of the dog William and for months he lay nigh unto death. But he lived, though the Norman arrow had taken his eye and a sword-slash across the head had left him strange and fey.”

Again the lights of fury flickered in the eyes of Hrothgar.

“Forty-three years of wandering and harrying on the Viking path!” he rasped. “William robbed the king of his kingdom, but not of men who would follow and die for him. See ye these Vikings of Skel Thorwald’s son? Northmen, Danes, Saxons who would not bide under the Norman heel – we are Harold’s kingdom! And you, you French dog, beg us for aid! Ha!”

“I was born in England – ” began Sir Eric.

“Aye,” sneered Hrothgar, “under the roof of a castle wrested from some good Saxon thane and given to a Norman thief!”

“But kin of mine fought at Senlac beneath the Golden Dragon as well as on William’s side,” protested Sir Eric. “On the distaff side I am of the blood of Godric, eorl of Wessex – ”

“The more shame to you, renegade mongrel,” raved the Saxon. “I – ”

The swift patter of small feet sounded on the rocks. The girl had wakened, and frightened by the rough voices, had come seeking her lover. She slipped through the mailed ranks and ran into Sir Eric’s arms, panting and staring wildly about in terror at the grim slayers. The Northmen fell silent.

Sir Eric turned beseechingly toward them: “You would not let a child of your own breed fall into the hands of the pagans? Muhammad Khan, sultan of Kizilshehr is close on our heels – scarce an hour’s ride away. Let us go into your galley and sail away with you – ”

“We have no galley,” said Skel Thorwald’s son. “In the night we ventured too close inshore and a hidden reef ripped the guts out of her. I warned Asgrimm Raven that no good would come of sailing out of the broad ocean into this narrow sea, which witches make green fire at night – ”

“And what could we, a scant hundred, do against a host?” broke in Hrothgar. “We could not aid you if we would – ”

“But you too are in peril,” said Sir Eric. “Muhammad will ride you down. He has no love for Franks.”

“We will buy our peace by delivering to him you and the girl and the Turk, bound hand and foot,” replied Hrothgar. “Asgrimm Raven cannot be far away; we lost him in the night but he will be scouring the coast to find us. We had not dared light a signal fire lest the Saracens see it. But now we will buy peace of this Eastern lord – ”

“Peace!” Harold’s voice was like the deep mellow call of a great golden bell. “Have done, Hrothgar. That was not well said.”

He approached Sir Eric and the girl and they would have knelt before him, but he prevented it and lightly laid his corded hand on Ettaire’s head, tilting gently back her face so that her great pleading eyes looked up at him. And I called on the Prophet beneath my breath for the ancient one seemed unearthly with his great height and the strange mystic gleam of his eye, and his white locks like a cloud about his mailed shoulders.

“Such eyes had Editha,” said he softly. “Aye, child, your face bears me back half a century. You shall not fall into the hands of the heathen while the last Saxon king can lift a sword. I have drawn my blade in many a less worthy brawl on the red roads I have walked. I will draw it again, little one.”

“This is madness!” cried out Hrothgar. “Shall kites pick the bones of Godwin’s son because of a French girl?”

“God’s splendor!” thundered the ancient. “Am I king or dog?”

“You are king, my liege,” sullenly growled Hrothgar, dropping his eyes. “It is yours to give command – even in madness we follow.”

Such is the devotion of savage men!

“Light the beacon-fire, Skel Thorwald’s son,” said Harold. “We will hold the Moslem hard till the coming of Asgrimm Raven, God willing. What are thy names, thine and this warrior of the East?”

Sir Eric told him, and Harold gave orders. And I was amazed to see them obeyed without question. Skel Thorwald’s son was chief of these men, but he seemed to grant Harold the due of a veritable monarch – he whose kingdom was lost and dead in the mists of time.

Sir Eric and Harold set my arm, binding it close to my body. Then the Vikings brought food and a barrel of stuff they called ale, which had been washed ashore from the broken ship, and while we watched the signal smoke go up, we ate and drank ravenously. And new vigor entered into Sir Eric. His face was drawn and haggard from lack of sleep and the strain of flight and battle, but his eyes blazed with indomitable light.

“We have scant time to arrange our battle-lines, your majesty,” said he, and the old king nodded.

“We cannot meet them in this open place. They would leaguer us on all sides and ride us down. But I noted a very broken space not far from here – ”

So we went to this place. A Viking had found a hollow in the rocks where water had gathered, and we gave the weary horses to drink and left them there, drooping in the shade of the cliffs. Sir Eric helped the girl along and would have given me a hand but I shook my head as I limped along. And Hrothgar came and slipped his mighty arm beneath my shoulders and so aided me, for my wounded leg was numb and stiff.

“A mad game, Turk,” he growled.

“Aye,” I answered as one in a dream. “We be all madmen and ghosts on the Road of Azrael. Many have died for the yellow-haired girl. More will die ere the road is at an end. Much madness have I seen in the days of my life, but never aught to equal this.”

V

> We shall not see the hills again where the grey cloud limns the oak,
> We who die in a naked land to succor an alien folk;
> Well – we have followed the Viking-path with a king to lead us forth –
> And scalds will thunder our victories in the washael halls of the North.
>
> *– The Song of Skel Thorwald's Son*

Already the drum of many hoofs was in our ears. We took our stand in a wide cleft of a cliff, with the broken, boulder strewn beach at our backs. The land in front of us was a ravine-torn waste, over which the horses could not charge. The Franks massed themselves in the wide cleft, shoulder to shoulder, wide shields overlapping. At the tip of this shield-wall stood King Harold with Skel Thorwald's son on one hand and Hrothgar on the other.

Sir Eric had found a sort of ledge in the cliff behind and above the heads of the warriors, and here he placed the girl.

"You must bide with her, Kosru Malik," said he. "Your arm is broken, your leg stiff; you are not fit to stand in the shield-wall."

"God gives," said I. "But my heart is heavy and the tang of bitterness is in my mouth. I had thought to fall beside you, my brother."

"I give her in your trust," said he, and clasping the girl to him, he held her hungrily a moment, then dropped from the ledge and strode away, while she wept and held out her white arms after him.

I drew my scimitar and laid it across my knees. Muhammad might win the fight, but when he came to take the girl he would find only a headless corpse. She should not fall into his hands alive.

Aye, I gazed on that slim white bit of flesh and swore in wonder and amaze that a frail woman could be the death of so many strong men. Verily, the star of Azrael hovers over the birth of a beautiful woman, the King of the Dead laughs aloud and ravens whet their black beaks.

She was brave enough. She ceased her whimpering soon and made shift to cleanse and rebandage my wounded leg, for which I thanked her. And

while so occupied there was a thunder of hoofs and Muhammad Khan was upon us. The riders numbered at least five hundred men, perhaps more, and their horses reeled with weariness. They drew rein at the beginning of the broken ground and gazed curiously at the silent band in the defile. I saw Muhammad Khan, slender, tall, with the heron feathers in his gilded helmet. And I saw Kai Kedra, Mirza Khan, Yar Akbar, Ahmed El Ghor the Arab, and Kojar Khan, the great emir of the Kurds, he who had led the riders who harried the Arabs.

Now Muhammad stood up in his golden stirrups and shading his eyes with his hand, turned and spoke to his emirs, and I knew he had recognized Sir Eric beside King Harold. Kai Kedra reined his steed forward through the broken gullies as far as it could go, and making a trumpet of his hands, called aloud in the tongue of the Crusaders: “Harken, Franks, Muhammad Khan, sultan of Kizilshehr, has no quarrel with you; but there stands one who has stolen a woman from the sultan; therefore, give her up to us and ye may depart peacefully.”

“Tell Muhammad,” answered Sir Eric, “that while one Frank lives, he shall not have Ettaire de Brose.”

So Kai Kedra rode back to Muhammad who sate his horse like a carven image, and the Persians conferred among themselves. And I wondered again. But yesterday Muhammad Khan had fought a fierce battle and destroyed his foes; now he should be riding in triumph down the broad streets of Kizilshehr, with crimson standards flying and golden trumpets blaring, and white-armed women flinging roses before his horse’s hoofs; yet here he was, far from his city, and far from the field of battle, with the dust and weariness of hard riding on him, and all for a slender girl-child.

Aye – Muhammad’s lust and Sir Eric’s love were whirlpools that drew in all about them. Muhammad’s warriors followed him because it was his will; King Harold opposed him because of the strangeness in his brain and the mad humor Franks call chivalry; Hrothgar, who hated Sir Eric, fought beside him because he loved Harold, as did Skel Thorwald’s son and his Vikings. And I, because Sir Eric was my brother-at-arms.

Now we saw the Persians dismounting, for they saw there was no charging on their weary horses over that ground. They came clambering over the gullies and boulders in their gilded armor and feathered helmets, with their silver-chased blades in their hands. Fighting on foot they hated, yet they came on, and the emirs and Muhammad himself with them. Aye, as

I saw the sultan striding forward with his men, my heart warmed to him again and I wished that Sir Eric and I were fighting for him, and not against him.

I thought the Franks would assail the Persians as they clamored across the ravines but the Vikings did not move out of their tracks. They made their foes come to them, and the Moslems came with a swift rush across the level space and a shouting of “Allaho akbar!”

That charge broke on the shield-wall as a river breaks on a shoal. Through the howling of the Persians thundered the deep rhythmic shouts of the Vikings and the crashing of the axes drowned the singing and whistling of the scimitars.

The Norsemen were immovable as a rock. After that first rush the Persians fell back, baffled, leaving a crescent of hacked corpses before the feet of the blond giants. Many strung bows and drove in their arrows at short range but the Vikings merely bent their heads and the shafts glanced from their horned helmets or shivered on the great shields.

And the Kizilshehrians came on again. Watching above, with the trembling girl beside me, I burned and froze with the desperate splendor of that battle. I gripped my scimitar hilt until blood oozed from beneath my finger nails. Again and again Muhammad’s warriors flung themselves with mad valor against that solid iron wall. And again and again they fell back broken. Dead men were heaped high and over their mangled bodies the living climbed to hack and smite.

Franks fell too, but their comrades trampled them under and closed the ranks again. There was no respite; ever Muhammad urged on his warriors, and ever he fought on foot with them, his emirs at his side. Allaho akbar! There fought a man and a king who was more than a king!

I had thought the Crusaders mighty fighters, but never had I seen such warriors as these, who never tired, whose light eyes blazed with strange madness, and who chanted wild songs as they smote. Aye, they dealt great blows! I saw Skel Thorwald’s son hew a Kurd through the hips so the legs fell one way and the torso another. I saw King Harold deal a Turk such a blow that the head flew ten paces from the body. I saw Hrothgar hew off a Persian’s leg at the thigh, though the limb was cased in heavy mail.

Yet they were no more terrible in battle than my brother-at-arms, Sir Eric. I swear, his sword was a wind of death and no man could stand before it. His face was lighted strangely and mystically; his arm was thrilled with

superhuman strength, and though I sensed a certain kinship between himself and the wild barbarians who chanted and smote beside him, yet a mystic, soul-something set him apart from and beyond them. Aye, the forge of hardship and suffering had burned from soul and brain and body all dross and left only the white hot fire of his inner soul that lifted him to heights unattainable by common men.

On and on the battle raged. Many Moslems had fallen, but many Vikings had died too. The remnant had been slowly hurled back by repeated charges until they were battling on the beach almost beneath the ledge whereon I stood with the girl. There the formation was broken among the boulders and the conflict changed to a straggling series of single conflicts. The Norsemen had taken fearful toll – by Allah, no more than a hundred Persians remained able to lift the sword! And of Franks there were less than a score.

Skel Thorwald's son and Yar Akbar met face to face just as the Viking's notched sword broke in a Moslem's skull. Yar Akbar shouted and swung up his scimitar but ere he could strike, the Viking roared and leaped like a great lion. His iron arms locked about the huge Afghan's body and I swear I heard above the battle, the splintering of Yar Akbar's bones. Then Skel Thorwald's son dashed him down, broken and dead, and catching up an axe from a dying hand, made at Muhammad Khan. Kai Kedra was before him. Even as the Viking struck, the Seljuk drove his scimitar through mail links and ribs and the two fell together.

I saw Sir Eric hard beset and bleeding and I rose and spoke to the girl.

"Allah defend you," said I, "but my brother-at-arms dies alone and I must go and fall beside him."

She had watched the fight white and still as a marble statue.

"Go, in God's name," she said, "and His power nerve your sword-arm – but leave me your dagger."

So I broke my trust for once, and dropping stiffly from the ledge, came across the battle-trampled beach, my scimitar in my right hand. As I came I saw Kojar Khan and King Harold at sword strokes, while Hrothgar, beard a-bristle, dealt mighty blows on all sides with his dripping axe. And the Arab, Ahmed El Ghor, ran in from the side and hacked through Harold's mail so the blood flowed over his girdle. Hrothgar cried out like a wild beast and lunged at Ahmed who faltered an instant before the Saxon's terrible eyes. And Hrothgar smote him a blow that sheared through mail like cloth, severed the shoulder and split the breast-bone, and splintered the haft in the

Saxon’s hand. At almost the same instant King Harold caught Kojar Khan’s blade on his left forearm. The edge sheared through a heavy golden armlet and bit to the bone but the ancient king split the Kurd’s skull with a single blow.

Sir Eric and Mirza Khan fought while the Persians surged about, seeking to strike a blow that would drop the Frank and yet not touch their emir. And I strode untouched through the battle, stepping over dead and dying men, and so came suddenly face to face with Muhammad Khan.

His lean face was haggard, his fine eyes shadowed, his scimitar red to the hilt. He had no buckler and his mail had been hacked to open rents in many places. He recognized me and slashed at me, and I locked his blade hilt to hilt; leaning my weight upon my weapon, I said to him: “Muhammad Khan, why be a fool? What is a Frankish girl to you, who might be emperor of half the world? Without you Kizilshehr will fall, will crumble to dust. Go your way and leave the girl to my brother-at-arms.”

But he only laughed as a madman laughs and tore his scimitar free. He leaped in, striking, and I braced my legs and parried his stroke, and driving my blade beneath his, found a rent in his mail and transfixed him beneath the heart. A moment he stood stiffly, mouth open, then as I freed my point, he slid to the blood-soaked earth and died.

“And thus fade the hopes of Islam and the glory of Kizilshehr,” I said bitterly.

A great shout went up from the weary, blood-stained Persians who yet remained and they stood frozen. I looked for Sir Eric; he stood swaying above the still form of Mirza Khan and as I looked he lifted his sword and pointed waveringly out to sea. And all the living looked. A long strange craft was sweeping inshore, low in the waist, high of stern and bows, with a prow carved like a dragon’s head. Long oars hurtled her through the calm water and the rowers were blond giants who roared and shouted. And as we saw this, Sir Eric crumpled and fell beside Mirza Khan.

But the Persians had had enough of war. They fled, those who were left to flee, taking with them the senseless Kai Kedra. I went to Sir Eric and loosened his mail, but even as I did so, I was pushed away and the girl Ettaire was sobbing on her lover. I helped her get off his mail and by Allah, it but hung in blood-stained shreds. He had a deep stab in his thigh, another in his shoulder and most of the mail had been hacked clean away from his

arms, which bore many flesh wounds; and a blade had cut through steel cap and coif links, making a wide scalp wound.

But none of the hurts was mortal. He was insensible from weakness – loss of blood and the terrific grind of the previous days. King Harold had been slashed deeply in the arm and across the ribs, and Hrothgar bled from gashes in the face and across the chest muscles, and limped from a stroke in the leg. Of the half dozen warriors that still lived, not one but was cut, bruised and gashed. Aye, a strange and grisly crew they made, with rent, crimson mail and notched and blood-stained weapons.

Now as King Harold sought to aid the girl and me in staunching Sir Eric's blood-flow, and Hrothgar cursed because the king would not allow his own wounds to be seen to first, the galley grounded and the warriors thronged the shore. Their chief, a tall, mighty man with long black locks, gazed at the corpse of Skel Thorwald's son and shrugged his shoulders. "Thor's love on a valiant warrior," was all he said. "He will revel in Valhalla this night."

Then the Franks took up Sir Eric and others of the wounded and took them aboard the ship, the girl clinging to his blood-stained hand and having no eyes or thought for any but her lover which is the way of women-kind, and as it should be. King Harold sat on a boulder while they bandaged his wounds and again deep awe came over me to see him so, with his sword across his knees and his white elf locks flying in the rising wind, and his strange aspect, like a grey and ancient king of some immemorial legend.

"Good sir," he said to me, "you cannot bide in this naked land. Come with us."

But I shook my head. "Nay, my lord, it may not be. But one thing I ask; let one of your warriors bring to me here the steeds we left down the beach. I can walk no more on this wounded leg."

It was done and the horses had so revived that I believed that by slow riding and changing mounts often I could win back out of the wilderness. King Harold hesitated as the rest went aboard: "Come with us, warrior! The sea-road is good for wanderers and landless men. There is quenching of thirst on the grey paths of the winds, and the flying clouds to still the sting of lost dreams. Come!"

"Nay," said I. "The trail of Azrael ends here. I have fought beside kings and seen sultans fall and my mind is dizzy with wonder. Take Sir Eric and the girl and when they tell their sons the tale in that far land beyond the

plains of Frankistan, let them sometimes remember Kosru Malik. But I may not come with you. Kizilshehr has fallen on this shore but there be other lords of Islam who have need of my sword. Salaam!”

And so sitting my steed, I saw the ship fade southward, and my eyes made out the ancient king standing like a grey statue on the poop, sword lifted high in salute, until the galley vanished in the blue haze of the distance and solitude brooded over the quiet waves of the sea.

The Lion of Tiberias

I

The battle in the meadowlands of the Euphrates was over, but not the slaughter. On that bloody field where the Caliph of Bagdad and his Turkish allies had broken the onrushing power of Doubeys ibn Sadaka of Hilla and the desert, the steel-clad bodies lay strewn like the drift of a storm. The great canal men called the Nile, which connected the Euphrates with the distant Tigris, was choked with the bodies of the tribesmen, and the survivors were panting in flight toward the white walls of Hilla which shimmered in the distance above the placid waters of the nearer river. Behind them the mailed hawks, the Seljuks, rode down the fleeing, cutting the fugitives from their saddles. The glittering dream of the Arab emir had ended in a storm of blood and steel, and his spurs struck blood as he rode for the distant river.

Yet at one spot in the littered field the fight still swirled and eddied, where the emir’s favorite son, Achmet, a slender lad of seventeen or eighteen, stood at bay with one companion. The mailed riders swooped in, struck and reined back, yelling in baffled rage before the lashing of the great sword in this man’s hands. His was a figure alien and incongruous, his red mane contrasting with the black locks about him no less than his dusty gray mail contrasted with the plumed burnished headpieces and silvered hauberks of the slayers. He was tall and powerful, with a wolfish hardness of limbs and frame that his mail could not conceal. His dark, scarred face was moody, his blue eyes cold and hard as the blue steel whereof Rhineland gnomes forge swords for heroes in northern forests.

Little of softness had there been in John Norwald’s life. Son of a house ruined by the Norman conquest, this descendant of feudal thanes had only memories of wattle-thatched huts and the hard life of a man-at-arms, serving for poor hire barons he hated. Born in north England, the ancient Danelagh, long settled by blue-eyed vikings, his blood was neither Saxon nor Norman, but Danish, and the grim unbreakable strength of the blue North was his. From each stroke of life that felled him, he rose fiercer and more unrelenting. He had not found existence easier in his long drift East which led him into the service of Sir William de Montserrat, seneschal of a castle on the frontier beyond Jordan.

In all his thirty years, John Norwald remembered but one kindly act, one deed of mercy; wherefore he now faced a whole host, desperate fury nerving his iron arms.

It had been Achmet's first raid, whereby his riders had trapped de Montserrat and a handful of retainers. The boy had not shrunk from the sword-play, but the savagery that butchers fallen foes was not his. Writhing in the bloody dust, stunned and half-dead, John Norwald had dimly seen the lifted scimitar thrust aside by a slender arm, and the face of the youth bending above him, the dark eyes filled with tears of pity.

Too gentle for the age and his manner of life, Achmet had made his astounded warriors take up the wounded Frank and bring him with them. And in the weeks that passed while Norwald's wounds healed, he lay in Achmet's tent by an oasis of the Asad tribes, tended by the lad's own *hakim*. When he could ride again, Achmet had brought him to Hilla. Doubeys ibn Sadaka always tried to humor his son's whims, and now, though muttering pious horror in his beard, he granted Norwald his life. Nor did he regret it, for in the grim Englishman he found a fighting-man worth any three of his own hawks.

John Norwald felt no tugging of loyalty toward de Montserrat, who had fled out of the ambush leaving him in the hands of the Moslems, nor toward the race at whose hands he had had only hard knocks all his life. Among the Arabs he found an environment congenial to his moody, ferocious nature, and he plunged into the turmoil of desert feuds, forays and border wars as if he had been born under a Bedouin black felt tent instead of a Yorkshire thatch. Now, with the failure of ibn Sadaka's thrust at Bagdad and sovereignty, the Englishman found himself once more hemmed in by chanting foes, mad with the tang of blood. About him and his youthful comrade swirled the wild riders of Mosul; the mailed hawks of Wasit and Bassorah, whose lord, Zenghi Imad ed din, had that day outmaneuvered ibn Sadaka and slashed his shining host to pieces.

On foot among the bodies of their warriors, their backs to a wall of dead horses and men, Achmet and John Norwald beat back the onslaught. A heron-feathered emir reined in his Turkoman steed, yelling his war-cry, his house-troops swirling in behind him.

“Back, boy; leave him to me!” grunted the Englishman, thrusting Achmet behind him. The slashing scimitar struck blue sparks from his basinet and his great sword dashed the Seljuk dead from his saddle. Bestriding the chieftain’s body, the giant Frank lashed up at the shrieking swordsmen who spurred in, leaning from their saddles to swing their blades. The curved sabers shivered on his shield and armor, and his long sword crashed through bucklers, breastplates and helmets, cleaving flesh and splintering bones, littering corpses at his iron-sheathed feet. Panting and howling the survivors reined back.

Then a roaring voice made them glance quickly about, and they fell back as a tall, strongly built horseman rode through them and drew rein before the grim Frank and his slender companion. John Norwald for the first time stood face to face with Zenghi esh Shami, Imad ed din, governor of Wasit and warden of Bassorah, whom men called the Lion of Tiberias, because of his exploits at the siege of Tiberias.

The Englishman noted the breadth of the mighty steel-clad shoulders, the grip of the powerful hands on rein and sword-hilt; the blazing magnetic blue eyes, setting off the ruthless lines of the dark face. Under the thin black lines of the mustaches the wide lips smiled, but it was the merciless grin of the hunting panther.

Zenghi spoke and there was at the back of his powerful voice a hint of mockery or gargantuan mirth that rose above wrath and slaughter.

“Who are these paladins that they stand among their prey like tigers in their den, and none is found to go against them? Is it Rustem whose heel is on the necks of my emirs – or only a renegade Nazarene? And the other – by Allah, unless I am mad, it is the cub of the desert wolf! Are you not Achmet ibn Doubeys?”

It was Achmet who answered; for Norwald maintained a grim silence, watching the Turk through slit eyes, fingers locked on his bloody hilt.

“It is so, Zenghi esh Shami,” answered the youth proudly, “and this is my brother at arms, John Norwald. Bid your wolves ride on, oh prince. Many of them have fallen. More shall fall before their steel tastes our hearts.”

Zenghi shrugged his mighty shoulders, in the grip of the mocking devil that lurks at the heart of all the sons of high Asia.

“Lay down your weapons, wolf-cub and Frank. I swear by the honor of my clan, no sword shall touch you.”

“I trust him not,” growled John Norwald. “Let him come a pace nearer and I’ll take him to hell with us.”

“Nay,” answered Achmet. “The prince keeps his word. Lay down your sword, my brother. We have done all men might do. My father the emir will ransom us.”

He tossed down his scimitar with a boyish sigh of unashamed relief, and Norwald grudgingly laid down his broadsword.

“I had rather sheathe it in his body,” he growled.

Achmet turned to the conqueror and spread his hands.

“Oh, Zenghi – ” he began, when the Turk made a quick gesture, and the two prisoners found themselves seized and their hands bound behind them with thongs that cut the flesh.

“There is no need of that, prince,” protested Achmet. “We have given ourselves into your hands. Bid your men loose us. We will not seek to escape.”

“Be silent, cub!” snapped Zenghi. The Turk’s eyes still danced with dangerous laughter, but his face was dark with passion. He reined nearer. “No sword shall touch you, young dog,” he said deliberately. “Such was my word, and I keep my oaths. No blade shall come near you, yet the vultures shall pluck your bones tonight. Your dog-sire escaped me, but you shall not escape, and when men tell him of your end, he will tear his locks in anguish.”

Achmet, held in the grip of the powerful soldiers, looked up, paling, but answered without a quaver of fear.

“Are you then a breaker of oaths, Turk?”

“I break no oath,” answered the lord of Wasit. “A whip is not a sword.”

His hand came up, gripping a terrible Turkoman scourge, to the seven rawhide thongs of which bits of lead were fastened. Leaning from his saddle as he struck, he brought those metal-weighted thongs down across the boy’s face with terrible force. Blood spurted and one of Achmet’s eyes was half torn from its socket. Held helpless, the boy could not evade the blows Zenghi rained upon him. But not a whimper escaped him, though his features turned to a bloody, raw, ghastly and eyeless ruin beneath the ripping strokes that shredded the flesh and splintered the bones beneath. Only at last a low animal-like moaning drooled from his mangled lips as he hung senseless and dying in the hands of his captors.

Without a cry or a word John Norwald watched, while the heart in his breast shrivelled and froze and turned to ice that naught could touch or thaw or break. Something died in his soul and in its place rose an elemental spirit unquenchable as frozen fire and bitter as hoar-frost.

The deed was done. The mangled broken horror that had been Prince Achmet ibn Doubeys was cast carelessly on a heap of dead, a touch of life still pulsing feebly through the tortured limbs. On the crimson mask of his features fell the shadow of vulture wings in the sunset. Zenghi threw aside the dripping scourge and turned to the silent Frank. But when he met the burning eyes of his captive, the smile faded from the prince's lips and the taunts died unspoken. In those cold terrible eyes the Turk read hate beyond common conception – a monstrous, burning, almost tangible thing, drawn up from the lower pits of hell, not to be dimmed by time or suffering.

The Turk shivered as from a cold unseen wind. Then he regained his composure. "I give you life, infidel," said Zenghi, "because of my oath. You have seen something of my power. Remember it in the long dreary years when you shall regret my mercy, and howl for death. And know that as I serve you, I will serve all Christendom. I have come into Outremer and left their castles desolate; I have ridden eastward with the heads of their chiefs swinging at my saddle. I will come again, not as a raider but a conqueror. I will sweep their hosts into the sea. Frankistan shall howl for her dead kings, and my horses stamp in the citadels of the infidel; for on this field I set my feet on the glittering stairs that lead to empire."

"This is my only word to you, Zenghi, dog of Tiberias," answered the Frank in a voice he did not himself recognize. "In a year, or ten years, or twenty years, I will come again to you, to pay this debt."

"Thus spake the trapped wolf to the hunter," answered Zenghi, and turning to the memluks who held Norwald, he said, "Place him among the unransomed captives. Take him to Bassorah and see that he is sold as a galley-slave. He is strong and may live for four or five years."

The sun was setting in crimson, gloomy and sinister for the fugitives who staggered toward the distant towers of Hilla that the setting sun tinted in blood. But the land was as one flooded with the scarlet glory of imperial pageantry to the Caliph who stood on a hillock, lifting his voice to Allah

who had once more vindicated the dominance of his chosen viceroy, and saved the sacred City of Peace from violation.

“Verily, verily, a young lion has risen in Islam, to be as a sword and shield to the Faithful, to revive the power of Muhammad, and to confound the infidels!”

II

Prince Zenghi was the son of a slave, which was no great handicap in that day, when the Seljuk emperors, like the Ottomans after them, ruled through slave generals and satraps. His father, Ak Sunkur, had held high posts under the sultan Melik Shah, and as a young boy Zenghi had been taken under the special guidance of that war-hawk Kerbogha of Mosul. The young eagle was not a Seljuk; his sires were Turks from beyond the Oxus, of that people which men later called Tatars. Men of this blood were rapidly becoming the dominant factor in western Asia, as the empire of the Seljuks, who had enslaved and trained them in the art of ruling, began to crumble. Emirs were stirring restlessly under the relaxing yoke of the sultans. The Seljuks were reaping the yield of the seeds of the feudal system they had sown, and among the jealous sons of Melik Shah there was none strong enough to rebuild the crumbling lines.

So far the fiefs, held by feudal vassals of the sultans, were at least nominally loyal to the royal masters, but already there was beginning the slow swirling upheaval that ultimately reared kingdoms on the ruins of the old empire. The driving impetus of one man advanced this movement more than anything else – the vital dynamic power of Zenghi esh Shami – Zenghi the Syrian, so called because of his exploits against the Crusaders in Syria. Popular legendry has passed him by, to exalt Saladin who followed and overshadowed him; yet he was the forerunner of the great Moslem heroes who were to shatter the Crusading kingdoms, and but for him the shining deeds of Saladin might never have come to pass.

In the dim and misty pageantry of phantoms that move shadow-like through those crimson years, one figure stands out clear and bold-etched – a figure on a rearing black stallion, the black silken cloak flowing from his mailed shoulders, the dripping scimitar in his hand. He is Zenghi, son of the pagan nomads, the first of a glittering line of magnificent conquerors before whom the iron men of Christendom reeled – Nur-ad-din, Saladin, Baibars, Kalawun, Bayazid – aye, and Subotai, Genghis Khan, Hulagu, Tamerlane, and Suleiman the Great.

In 1124 the fall of Tyre to the Crusaders marked the high tide of Frankish power in Asia. Thereafter the hammer-strokes of Islam fell on a waning sovereignty. At the time of the battle of the Euphrates the kingdom of

Outremer extended from Edessa in the north to Ascalon in the south, a distance of some five hundred miles. Yet it was in few places more than fifty miles broad, from east to west, and walled Moslem towns were within a day's ride of Christian keeps. Such a condition could not exist forever. That it existed as long as it did was owing partly to the indomitable valor of the cross-wearers, and partly to the lack of a strong leader among the Moslems.

In Zenghi such a leader was found. When he broke ibn Sadaka he was thirty-eight years of age, and had held his fief of Wasit but a year. Thirty-six was the minimum age at which the sultans allowed a man to hold a governorship, and most notables were much older when they were so honored than was Zenghi. But the honor only whetted his ambition.

The same sun that shone mercilessly on John Norwald, stumbling along in his chains on the road that led to the galley's bench, gleamed on Zenghi's gilded mail as he rode north to enter the service of the sultan Muhammad at Hamadhan. His boast that his feet were set on the stairs of fame was no idle one. All orthodox Islam vied in honoring him.

To the Franks who had felt his talons in Syria, came faint tidings of that battle beside the Nile canal, and they heard other word of his growing power. There came tidings of a dispute between sultan and Caliph, and of Zenghi turning against his former master, riding into Bagdad with the banners of Muhammad. Honors rained like stars on his turban, sang the Arab minstrels. Warden of Bagdad, governor of Irak, prince of el Jezira, Atabeg of Mosul – on up the glittering stairs of power rode Zenghi, while

the Franks ignored the tidings from the East with the perverse blindness of their race – until hell burst along their borders and the roar of the Lion shook their towers.

Outposts and castles went up in flames, and Christian throats felt the knife-edge, Christian necks the yoke of slavery. Outside the walls of doomed Atharib, Baldwin, king of Jerusalem, saw his picked chivalry swept broken and flying into the desert. Again at Barin the Lion drove Baldwin and his Damascene allies headlong in flight, and when the Emperor of Byzantium himself, John Comnene, moved against the victorious Turk, he found himself chasing a desert wind that turned unexpectedly and slaughtered his stragglers, and harried his lines until life was a burden and a stone about his royal neck. He decided that his Moslem neighbors were no more to be despised than his barbaric Frankish allies, and before he sailed away from the Syrian coast he held secret parleys with Zenghi that bore crimson fruit in later years. His going left the Turk free to move against his eternal enemies, the Franks. His objective was Edessa, northernmost stronghold of the Christians, and one of the most powerful of their cities. But like a crafty swordsman he blinded his foes by feints and gestures.

Outremer reeled before his blows. The land was filled with the chanting of the riders, the twang of bows, and the whine of swords. Zenghi's hawks swept through the land and their horses' hoofs spattered blood on the standards of kings. Walled castles toppled in flame, sword-hacked corpses strewed the valleys, dark hands knotted in the yellow tresses of screaming women, and the lords of the Franks cried out in wrath and pain. Up the glittering stairs of empire rode Zenghi on his black stallion, his scimitar dripping in his hand, stars jeweling his turban.

And while he swept the land like a storm, and hurled down barons to make drinking-cups of their skulls and stables of their palaces, the galley-slaves, whispering to one another in their eternal darkness where the oars clacked everlastingly and the lap of the waves was a symphony of slow madness, spoke of a red-haired giant who never spoke, and whom neither labor, nor starvation, nor the dripping lash, nor the drag of the bitter years could break.

The years passed, glittering, star-strewn, gilt-spangled years to the rider in the shining saddle, to the lord in the golden-domed palace; black, silent, bitter years in the creaking, reeking, rat-haunted darkness of the galleys.

III

"He rides on the wind with the stars in his hair;
Like Death falls his shadow on castles and towns;
And the kings of the Caphars cry out in despair,
For the hoofs of his stallion have trampled their crowns."

Thus sang a wandering Arab minstrel in the tavern of a little outpost village which stood on the ancient – and now little-traveled – road from Antioch to Aleppo. The village was a cluster of mud huts huddling about a castle-crowned hill. The population was mongrel – Syrians, Arabs, mixed breeds with Frankish blood in their veins. Tonight a representative group was gathered in the inn – native laborers from the fields; a lean Arab herdsman or two; French men-at-arms in worn leather and rusty mail, from the castle on the hill; a pilgrim wandered off his route to the holy places of the south; the ragged minstrel. Two figures held the attention of casual lookers-on. They sat on opposite sides of a rudely carved table, eating meat and drinking wine, and they were evidently strangers to each other, since no word passed between them, though each glanced surreptitiously at the other from time to time.

Both were tall, hard-limbed and broad-shouldered, but there the resemblance ended. One was clean-shaven, with a hawk-like predatory face from which keen blue eyes gleamed coldly. His burnished helmet lay on the bench beside him with the kite-shaped shield, and his mail coif was pushed back, revealing a mass of red-gold hair. His armor gleamed with gilt-work and silver chasing, and the hilt of his broadsword sparkled with jewels.

The man opposite him seemed drab by comparison, with his dusty gray chain-mail and worn sword-hilt untouched by any gleam of gem or gold. His square-cut tawny mane was matched by a short beard which masked the strong lines of jaw and chin.

The minstrel finished his song with an exultant clash of the strings, and eyed his audience half in insolence, half in uneasiness.

"And thus, masters," he intoned, one eye on possible alms, the other on the door, "Zenghi, prince of Wasit, brought his memluks up the Tigris on boats to aid the sultan Muhammad who lay encamped about the walls of

Bagdad. Then, when the Caliph saw the banners of Zenghi, he said, ‘Lo, now is come up against me the young lion who overthrew ibn Sadaka for me; open the gates, friends, and throw yourselves on his mercy, for there is none found to stand before him.’ And it was done, and the sultan gave to Zenghi all the land of el Jezira.

“Gold and power flowed through his fingers. Mosul, his capital, which he found a waste of ruins, he made to bloom as roses blossom by an oasis. Kings trembled before him but the poor rejoiced, for he shielded them from the sword. His servants looked on him as upon God. Of him it is told that he gave a slave a rusk to hold, and not for a year did he ask for it. Then when he demanded it, lo, the man gave it into his hands, wrapped in a napkin, and for his diligence Zenghi gave him command of a castle. For though the Atabeg is a hard master, yet he is just to True Believers.”

The knight in the gleaming mail flung the minstrel a coin.

“Well sung, pagan!” he cried in a harsh voice that sounded the Norman-French words strangely. “Know you the song of the sack of Edessa?”

“Aye, my lord,” smirked the minstrel, “and with the favor of your lordships I will essay it.”

“Your head shall roll on the floor first,” spoke the other knight suddenly in a voice deep and somber with menace. “It is enough that you praise the dog Zenghi in our teeth. No man sings of his butcheries at Edessa, beneath a Christian roof in my presence.”

The minstrel blenched and gave back, for the cold gray eyes of the Frank were grim. The knight in the ornate mail looked at the speaker curiously, no resentment in his reckless dancing eyes.

“You speak as one to whom the subject is a sore one, friend,” said he.

The other fixed his somber stare on his questioner, but made no reply save a slight shrug of his mighty mailed shoulders as he continued his meal.

“Come,” persisted the stranger, “I meant no offense. I am newly come to these parts – I am Sir Roger d’Ibelin, vassal to the king of Jerusalem. I have fought Zenghi in the south, when Baldwin and Anar of Damascus made alliance against him, and I only wished to hear the details of the taking of Edessa. By God, there were few Christians who escaped to bear the tale.”

“I crave pardon for my seeming discourtesy,” returned the other. “I am Miles du Courcey, in the service of the prince of Antioch. I was in Edessa when it fell.

“Zenghi came up from Mosul and laid waste the Diyar Bekr, taking town after town from the Seljuks. Count Joscelin de Courtenay was dead, and the rule was in the hands of that sluggard, Joscelin II. In the late fall of the year Zenghi laid siege to Amid, and the count bestirred himself – but only to march away to Turbessel with all his household.

“We were left at Edessa with the town in charge of fat Armenian merchants who gripped their money-bags and trembled in fear of Zenghi, unable to overcome their swinish avarice enough to pay the mongrel mercenaries Joscelin had left to defend the city.

“Well, as anyone might know, Zenghi left Amid and marched against us as soon as word reached him that the poor fool Joscelin had departed. He reared his siege engines over against the walls, and day and night hurled assaults against the gates and towers, which had never fallen had we had the proper force to man them.

“But to give them their due, our wretched mercenaries did well. There was no rest or ease for any of us; day and night the ballistas creaked, stones and beams crashed against the towers, arrows blinded the sky in their whistling clouds, and Zenghi’s chanting devils swarmed up the walls. We beat them back until our swords were broken, our mail hung in bloody tatters, and our arms were dead with weariness. For a month we kept Zenghi at bay, waiting for Count Joscelin, but he never came.

“It was on the morning of December 23rd that the rams and engines made a great breach in the outer wall, and the Moslems came through like a river bursting through a dam. The defenders died like flies along the broken ramparts, but human power could not stem that tide. The memluks rode into the streets and the battle became a massacre. The Turkish sword knew no mercy. Priests died at their altars, women in their courtyards, children at their play. Bodies choked the streets, the gutters ran crimson, and through it all rode Zenghi on his black stallion like a phantom of Death.”

“Yet you escaped?”

The cold gray eyes became more somber.

“I had a small band of men-at-arms. When I was dashed senseless from my saddle by a Turkish mace, they took me up and rode for the western gate. Most of them died in the winding streets, but the survivors brought me to safety. When I recovered my senses the city lay far behind me.

“But I rode back.” The speaker seemed to have forgotten his audience. His eyes were distant, withdrawn; his bearded chin rested on his mailed fist; he seemed to be speaking to himself. “Aye, I had ridden into the teeth of hell itself. But I met a servant, fallen death-stricken among the straggling fugitives, and ere he died he told me that she whom I sought was dead – struck down by a memluk’s scimitar.”

Shaking his iron-clad shoulders he roused himself as from a bitter revery. His eyes grew cold and hard again; the harsh timbre re-entered his voice.

“Two years have seen a great change in Edessa, I hear. Zenghi rebuilt the walls and has made it one of his strongest holds. Our hold on the land is crumbling and tearing away. With a little aid, Zenghi will surge over Outremer and obliterate all vestiges of Christendom.”

“That aid may come from the north,” muttered a bearded man-at-arms. “I was in the train of the barons who marched with John Comnene when Zenghi outmaneuvered him. The emperor has no love for us.”

“Bah! He is at least a Christian,” laughed the man who called himself d’Ibelin, running his restless fingers through his clustering golden locks.

Du Courcey’s cold eyes narrowed suddenly as they rested on a heavy golden ring of curious design on the other’s finger, but he said nothing.

Heedless of the intensity of the Norman’s stare, d’Ibelin rose and tossed a coin on the table to pay his reckoning. With a careless word of farewell to the idlers he rose and strode out of the inn with a clanking of armor. The men inside heard him shouting impatiently for his horse. And Sir Miles du Courcey rose, took up shield and helmet, and followed.

The man known as d’Ibelin had covered perhaps a half-mile, and the castle on the hill was but a faint bulk behind him, gemmed by a few points of light, when a drum of hoofs made him wheel with a guttural oath that was not French. In the dim starlight he made out the form of his recent inn companion, and he laid hand on his jeweled hilt. Du Courcey drew up beside him and spoke to the grimly silent figure.

“Antioch lies the other way, good sir. Perhaps you have taken the wrong road by mischance. Three hours’ ride in this direction will bring you into Saracen territory.”

“Friend,” retorted the other, “I have not asked your advice concerning my road. Whether I go east or west is scarcely your affair.”

“As vassal to the prince of Antioch it is my affair to inquire into suspicious actions within his domain. When I see a man traveling under false pretenses, with a Saracen ring on his finger, riding by night toward the border, it seems suspicious enough for me to make inquiries.”

“I can explain my actions if I see fit,” bruskly answered d’Ibelin, “but these insulting accusations I will answer at the sword’s point. What mean you by false pretensions?”

“You are not Roger d’Ibelin. You are not even a Frenchman.”

“No?” A sneer rasped in the other’s voice as he slipped his sword from its sheath.

“No. I have been to Constantinople, and seen the northern mercenaries who serve the Greek emperor. I can not forget your hawk face. You are John Comnene’s spy – Wulfgar Edric’s son, a captain in the Varangian Guard.”

A wild beast snarl burst from the masquerader’s lips and his horse screamed and leaped convulsively as he struck in the spurs, throwing all his frame behind his sword arm as the beast plunged. But du Courcey was too seasoned a fighter to be caught so easily. With a wrench of his rein he brought his steed round, rearing. The Varangian’s frantic horse plunged past, and the whistling sword struck fire from the Norman’s lifted shield. With a furious yell the fierce Norman wheeled again to the assault, and the horses reared together while the swords of their riders hissed, circled in flashing arcs, and fell with ringing clash on mail-links or shield.

The men fought in grim silence, save for the panting of straining effort, but the clangor of their swords awoke the still night and sparks flew as from a blacksmith’s anvil. Then with a deafening crash a broadsword shattered a helmet and splintered the skull within. There followed a loud clash of armor as the loser fell heavily from his saddle. A riderless horse galloped away, and the conqueror, shaking the sweat from his eyes, dismounted and bent above the motionless steel-clad figure.

IV

On the road that leads south from Edessa to Rakka, the Moslem host lay encamped, the lines of gay-colored pavilions spread out in the plains. It was a leisurely march, with wagons, luxurious equipment, and whole households with women and slaves. After two years in Edessa the Atabeg of Mosul was returning to his capital by the way of Rakka. Fires glimmered in the gathering dusk where the first stars were peeping; lutes twanged and voices were lifted in song and laughter about the cooking-pots.

Before Zenghi, playing at chess with his friend and chronicler, the Arab Ousama of Sheyzar, came the eunuch Yaruktash, who salaamed low and in his squeaky voice intoned, “Oh, Lion of Islam, an emir of the infidels desires audience with thee – the captain of the Greeks who is called Wulfgar Edric’s son. The chief Il-Ghazi and his memluks came upon him, riding alone, and would have slain him but he threw up his arm and on his hand they saw the ring thou gavest the emperor as a secret sign for his messengers.”

Zenghi tugged his gray-shot black beard and grinned, well pleased.

“Let him be brought before me.” The slave bowed and withdrew.

To Ousama, Zenghi said, “Allah, what dogs are these Christians, who betray and cut one another’s throats for the promise of gold or land!”

“Is it well to trust such a man?” queried Ousama. “If he will betray his kind, he will surely betray you if he may.”

“May I eat pork if I trust him,” retorted Zenghi, moving a chessman with a jewelled finger. “As I move this pawn I will move the dog-emperor of the Greeks. With his aid I will crack the kings of Outremer like nutshells. I have promised him their seaports, and he will keep his promises until he thinks his prizes are in his hands. Ha! Not towns but the sword-edge I will give him. What we take together shall be mine, nor will that suffice me. By Allah, not Mesopotamia, nor Syria, nor all Asia Minor is enough! I will cross the Hellespont! I will ride my stallion through the palaces on the Golden Horn! Frankistan herself shall tremble before me!”

The impact of his voice was like that of a harsh-throated trumpet, almost stunning the hearers with its dynamic intensity. His eyes blazed, his fingers knotted like iron on the chessboard.

“You are old, Zenghi,” warned the cautious Arab. “You have done much. Is there no limit to your ambitions?”

“Aye!” laughed the Turk. “The horn of the moon and the points of the stars! Old? Eleven years older than thyself, and younger in spirit than thou wert ever. My thews are steel, my heart is fire, my wits keener even than on the day I broke ibn Sadaka beside the Nile and set my feet on the shining stairs of glory! Peace, here comes the Frank.”

A small boy of about eight years of age, sitting cross-legged on a cushion near the edge of the dais whereon lay Zenghi’s divan, had been staring up in rapt adoration. His fine brown eyes sparkled as Zenghi spoke of his ambition, and his small frame quivered with excitement, as if his soul had taken fire from the Turk’s wild words. Now he looked at the entrance of the pavilion with the others, as the memluks entered with the visitor between them, his scabbard empty. They had taken his weapons outside the royal tent.

The memluks fell back and ranged themselves on either side of the dais, leaving the Frank in an open space before their master. Zenghi’s keen eyes swept over the tall form in its glittering gold-worked mail, took in the clean-shaven face with its cold eyes, and rested on the Koran-inscribed ring on the man’s finger.

“My master, the emperor of Byzantium,” said the Frank in Turki, “sends thee greeting, oh Zenghi, Lion of Islam.”

As he spoke he took in the details of the impressive figure, clad in steel, silk and gold, before him; the strong dark face, the powerful frame which, despite the years, betokened steel-spring muscles and unquenchable vitality; above all the Atabeg’s eyes, gleaming with unperishable youth and innate fierceness.

“And what said thy master, oh Wulfgar?” asked the Turk.

“He sends thee this letter,” answered the Frank, drawing forth a packet and proffering it to Yaruktash, who in turn, and on his knees, delivered it to Zenghi. The Atabeg perused the parchment, signed in the Emperor’s unmistakable hand and sealed with the royal Byzantine seal. Zenghi never dealt with underlings, but always with the highest power of friends or foes.

“The seals have been broken,” said the Turk, fixing his piercing eyes on the inscrutable countenance of the Frank. “Thou hast read?”

“Aye. I was pursued by men of the prince of Antioch, and fearing lest I be seized and searched, I opened the missive and read it, so that if I were forced to destroy it lest it fall into enemy hands, I could repeat the message to thee by word of mouth.”

“Let me hear, then, if thy memory be equal to thy discretion,” commanded the Atabeg.

“As thou wilt. My master says to thee, ‘Concerning that which hath passed between us, I must have better proof of thy good faith. Wherefore do thou send me by this messenger, who, though unknown to thee, is a man to be trusted, full details of thy desires and good proof of the aid thou hast promised us in the proposed movement against Antioch. Before I put to sea I must know that thou art ready to move by land, and there must be binding oaths between us.’ And the missive is signed with the emperor’s own hand.”

The Turk nodded; a mirthful devil danced in his blue eyes.

“They are his very words. Blessed is the monarch who boasts such a vassal. Sit ye upon that heap of cushions; meat and drink shall be brought to you.”

Calling Yaruktash, Zenghi whispered in his ear. The eunuch started, stared, and then salaamed and hastened from the pavilion. Slaves brought food and the forbidden wine in golden vessels, and the Frank broke his fast with unfeigned relish. Zenghi watched him inscrutably and the glittering memluks stood like statues of burnished steel.

“You came first to Edessa?” asked the Atabeg.

“Nay. When I left my ship at Antioch I set forth for Edessa, but I had scarce crossed the border when a band of wandering Arabs, recognizing your ring, told me you were on the march for Rakka, thence to Mosul. So I turned aside and rode to cut your line of march, and my way being made clear for me by virtue of the ring which all your subjects know, I was at last met by the chief Il-Ghazi who escorted me thither.”

Zenghi nodded his leonine head slowly.

“Mosul calls me. I go back to my capital to gather my hawks, to brace my lines. When I return I will sweep the Franks into the sea with the aid of – thy master.

“But I forget the courtesy due a guest. This is the prince Ousama of Sheyzar, and this child is the son of my friend Nejm-ed-din, who saved my army and my life when I fled from Karaja the Cup-bearer – one of the few

foes who ever saw my back. His father dwells at Baalbekk, which I gave him to rule, but I have taken Yusef with me to look on Mosul. Verily, he is more to me than my own sons. I have named him Salah-ed-din, and he shall be a thorn in the flesh of Christendom."

At this instant Yaruktash entered and whispered in Zenghi's ear, and the Atabeg nodded.

As the eunuch withdrew, Zenghi turned to the Frank. The Turk's manner had changed subtly. His lids drooped over his glittering eyes and a faint hint of mockery curled his bearded lips.

"I would show you one whose countenance you know of old," said he.

The Frank looked up in surprize.

"Have I a friend in the hosts of Mosul?"

"You shall see!" Zenghi clapped his hands, and Yaruktash, appearing at the door of the pavilion grasping a slender white wrist, dragged the owner into view and cast her from him so that she fell to the carpet almost at the Frank's feet. With a terrible cry he started up, his face deathly.

"*Ellen!* My God! Alive!"

"Miles!" she echoed his cry, struggling to her knees. In a mist of stupefaction he saw her white arms outstretched, her pale face framed in the golden hair which fell over the white shoulders the scanty *harim* garb left bare. Forgetting all else he fell to his knees beside her, gathering her into his arms.

"Ellen! Ellen de Tremont! I had scoured the world for you and hacked a path through the legions of hell itself – but they said you were dead. Musa, before he died at my feet, swore he saw you lying in your blood among the corpses of your servants in your courtyard."

"Would God it had been so!" she sobbed, her golden head against his steel-clad breast. "But when they cut down my servants I fell among the bodies in a swoon, and their blood stained my garments; so men thought me dead. It was Zenghi himself who found me alive, and took me – " She hid her face in her hands.

“And so, Sir Miles du Courcey,” broke in the sardonic voice of the Turk, “you have found a friend among the Mosuli! Fool! My senses are keener than a whetted sword. Think you I did not know you, despite your clean-shaven face? I saw you too often on the ramparts of Edessa, hewing down my memluks. I knew you as soon as you entered. What have you done with the real messenger?”

Grimly Miles disengaged himself from the girl’s clinging arms and rose, facing the Atabeg. Zenghi likewise rose, quick and lithe as a great panther, and drew his scimitar, while from all sides the heron-feathered memluks began to edge in silently. Miles’ hand fell away from his empty scabbard and his eyes rested for an instant on something close to his feet – a curved knife, used for carving fruit, and lying there forgotten, half hidden under a cushion.

“Wulfgar Edric’s son lies dead among the trees on the Antioch road,” said Miles grimly. “I shaved off my beard and took his armor and the ring the dog bore.”

“The better to spy on me,” quoth Zenghi.

“Aye.” There was no fear in Miles du Courcey. “I wished to learn the details of the plot you hatched with John Comnene, and to obtain proofs of his treachery and your ambitions to show to the lords of Outremer.”

“I deduced as much,” smiled Zenghi. “I knew you, as I said. But I wished you to betray yourself fully; hence the girl, who has spoken your name with weeping many times in the years of her captivity.”

“It was an unworthy gesture and one in keeping with your character,” said Miles somberly. “Yet I thank you for allowing me to see her once more, and to know that she is alive whom I thought long dead.”

“I have done her great honor,” answered Zenghi laughing. “She has been in my *harim* for two years.”

Miles’ grim eyes only grew more somber, but the great veins swelled almost to bursting along his temples. At his feet the girl covered her face with her white hands and wept silently. The boy on the cushion looked about uncertainly, not understanding. Ousama’s fine eyes were touched with pity. But Zenghi grinned broadly. Such scenes were like wine to the Turk, shaking inwardly with the gargantuan laughter of his breed.

“You shall bless me for my bounty, Sir Miles,” said Zenghi. “For my kingly generosity you shall give praise. Lo, the girl is yours! When I tear you between four wild horses tomorrow, she shall accompany you to hell on a pointed stake – *ha!*”

Like a striking cobra Miles du Courcey had moved. Snatching the knife from beneath the cushion he leaped – not at the guarded Atabeg on the divan, but at the child on the edge of the dais. Before any could stop him, he caught up the boy Saladin with one hand, and with the other pressed the curved edge to his throat.

“Back, dogs!” His voice cracked with mad triumph. “Back, or I send this heathen spawn to hell!”

Zenghi, his face livid, yelled a frenzied order, and the memluks fell back. Then while the Atabeg stood trembling and uncertain, at a loss for the first and only time of his whole wild career, du Courcey backed toward the door, holding his captive, who neither cried out nor struggled. The contemplative brown eyes showed no fear, only a fatalistic resignation of a philosophy beyond the owner’s years.

“To me, Ellen!” snapped the Norman, his somber despair changed to dynamic action. “Out of the door behind me – back, dogs, I say!”

Out of the pavilion he backed, and the memluks who ran up, sword in hand, stopped short as they saw the imminent peril of their lord’s favorite. Du Courcey knew that the success of his action depended on speed. The surprize and boldness of his move had taken Zenghi off guard, that was all. A group of horses stood near by, saddled and bridled, always ready for the Atabeg’s whim, and du Courcey reached them with a single long stride, the grooms falling back from his threat.

“Into a saddle, Ellen!” he snapped, and the girl, who had followed him like one in a daze, reacting mechanically to his orders, swung herself up on the nearest mount. Quickly he followed suit and cut the tethers that held their mounts. A bellow from inside the tent told him Zenghi’s momentarily scattered wits were working again, and he dropped the child unhurt into the sand. His usefulness was past, as a hostage. Zenghi, taken by surprize, had instinctively followed the promptings of his unusual affection for the child, but Miles knew that with his ruthless reason dominating him again, the Atabeg would not allow even that affection to stand in the way of their recapture.

The Norman wheeled away, drawing Ellen’s steed with him, trying to shield her with his own body from the arrows which were already whistling about them. Shoulder to shoulder they raced across the wide open space in front of the royal pavilion, burst through a ring of fires, floundered for an instant among tent-pegs, cords and scurrying yelling figures, then struck the open desert flying and heard the clamor die out behind them.

It was dark, clouds flying across the sky and drowning the stars. With the clatter of hoofs behind them, Miles reined aside from the road that led westward, and turned into the trackless desert. Behind them the hoof-beats faded westward. The pursuers had taken the old caravan road, supposing the fugitives to be ahead of them.

“What now, Miles?” Ellen was riding alongside, and clinging to his iron-sheathed arm as if she feared he might fade suddenly from her sight.

“If we ride straight for the border they will have us before dawn,” he answered. “But I know this land as well as they – I have ridden all over it of old in foray and war with the counts of Edessa; so I know that Jabar Kal’at lies within our reach to the southwest. The commander of Jabar is a nephew of Muin-ed-din Anar, who is the real ruler of Damascus, and who, as perhaps you know, has made a pact with the Christians against Zenghi, his old rival. If we can reach Jabar, the commander will give us shelter and food, and fresh horses and an escort to the border.”

The girl bowed her head in acquiescence. She was still like one dazed. The light of hope burned too feebly in her soul to sting her with new pangs. Perhaps in her captivity she had absorbed some of the fatalism of her masters. Miles looked at her, drooping in the saddle, humble and silent, and

thought of the picture he retained of a saucy, laughing beauty, vibrant with vitality and mirth. And he cursed Zenghi and his works with sick fury. So through the night they rode, the broken woman and the embittered man, handiworks of the Lion who dealt in swords and souls and human hearts, and whose victims, living and dead, filled the land like a blight of sorrow, agony and despair.

All night they pressed forward as fast as they dared, listening for sounds that would tell them the pursuers had found their trail, and in the dawn, which lit the helmets of swift-following horsemen, they saw the towers of Jabar rising above the mirroring waters of the Euphrates. It was a strong keep, guarded with a moat that encircled it, connecting with the river at either end. At their hail the commander of the castle appeared on the wall, and a few words sufficed to cause the drawbridge to be lowered. It was not a moment too soon. As they clattered across the bridge, the drum of hoofs was in their ears, and as they passed through the gates, arrows fell in a shower about them.

The leader of the pursuers reined his rearing steed and called arrogantly to the commander on the tower, “Oh man, give up these fugitives, lest thy blood quench the embers of thy keep!”

“Am I then a dog that you speak to me thus?” queried the Seljuk, clutching his beard in passion. “Begone, or my archers will feather thy carcass with fifty shafts.”

For answer the memluk laughed jeeringly and pointed to the desert. The commander paled. Far away the sun glinted on a moving ocean of steel. His practiced eye told him that a whole army was on the march. “Zenghi has turned aside from his march to Mosul to hunt down a pair of fleeing jackals,” called the memluk mockingly. “Great honor he has done them, marching hard on their spoor all night. Send them out, oh fool, and my master will ride on in peace.”

“Let it be as Allah wills,” said the Seljuk, recovering his poise. “But the friends of my uncle have thrown themselves into my hands, and may shame rest on me and mine if I give them to the butcher.”

Nor did he alter his resolution when Zenghi himself, his face dark with passion as the cloak that flowed from his steel-clad shoulders, sat his stallion beneath the towers and called to him: “Oh man, by receiving mine enemy thou hast forfeited thy castle and thy life. Yet I will be merciful. Send out those who fled and I will allow thee to march out unharmed with

thy retainers and women. Persist in this madness and I will burn thee like a rat in thy castle."

"Let it be as Allah wills," repeated the Seljuk philosophically, and in an undertone spoke quietly to a crouching archer, "Drive me quickly a shaft through yon dog."

The arrow glanced harmlessly from Zenghi's breastplate and the Atabeg galloped out of range with a shout of mocking laughter. Now began the siege of Jabar Kal'at, unsung and unglorified, yet in the course of which the dice of Fate were cast.

Zenghi's riders laid waste the surrounding countryside and drew a cordon about the castle through which no courier could steal to ride for aid. While the emir of Damascus and the lords of Outremer remained in ignorance of what was taking place beyond the Euphrates, their ally waged his unequal battle.

By nightfall the wagons and siege engines came up, and Zenghi set to his task with the skill of long practice. The Turkish sappers dammed up the moat at the upper end, despite the arrows of the defenders, and filled up the drained ditch with earth and stone. Under cover of darkness they sank mines beneath the towers. Zenghi's ballistas creaked and crashed, and huge rocks knocked men off the walls like ten-pins or smashed through the roofs of the towers. His rams gnawed and pounded at the walls, his archers plied the turrets with their arrows everlastingly, and on scaling-ladders and storming-towers his memluks moved unceasingly to the onset. Food waned in the castle's larders; the heaps of dead grew larger, the rooms became full of wounded men, groaning and writhing.

But the Seljuk commander did not falter on the path his feet had taken. He knew that he could not now buy safety from Zenghi, even by giving up his guests; to his credit, he never even considered giving them up. Du Courcey knew this, and though no word of the matter was spoken between them, the commander had evidence of the Norman's fierce gratitude. Miles showed his appreciation in actions, not words – in the fighting on the walls, in the slaughter in the gates, in the long night-watches on the towers; with whirring sword-strokes that clove bucklers and peaked helmets, that cleft spines and severed necks and limbs and shattered skulls; by the casting down of scaling-ladders when the clinging Turks howled as they crashed to their death, and their comrades cried out at the terrible strength in the Frank's naked hands. But the rams crunched, the arrows sang, the steel tides

surged on again and again, and the haggard defenders dropped one by one until only a skeleton force held the crumbling walls of Jabar Kal’at.

V

In his pavilion little more than a bowshot from the beleaguered walls, Zenghi played chess with Ousama. The madness of the day had given way to the brooding silence of night, broken only by the distant cries of wounded men in delirium.

“Men are my pawns, friend,” said the Atabeg. “I turn adversity into triumph. I had long sought an excuse to attack Jabar Kal’at, which will make a strong outpost against the Franks once I have taken it and repaired the dents I have made, and filled it with my memluks. I knew my captives would ride hither; that is why I broke camp and took up the march before my scouts found their tracks. It was their logical refuge. I will have the castle and the Franks, which last is most vital. Were the Caphars to learn now of my intrigue with the emperor, my plans might well come to naught. But they will not know until I strike. Du Courcey will never bear news to them. If he does not fall with the castle, I will tear him between wild horses as I promised, and the infidel girl shall watch, sitting on a pointed stake.”

“Is there no mercy in your soul, Zenghi?” protested the Arab.

“Has life shown mercy to me save what I wrung forth by the sword?” exclaimed Zenghi, his eyes blazing in a momentary upheaval of his passionate spirit. “A man must smite or be smitten – slay or be slain. Men are wolves, and I am but the strongest wolf of the pack. Because they fear me, men crawl and kiss my sandals. Fear is the only emotion by which they may be touched.”

“You are a pagan at heart, Zenghi,” sighed Ousama.

“It may be,” answered the Turk with a shrug of his shoulders. “Had I been born beyond the Oxus and bowed to yellow Erlik as did my grandsire, I had been no less Zenghi the Lion. I have spilled rivers of gore for the glory of Allah, but I have never asked mercy or favor of Him. What care the gods if a man lives or dies? Let me live deep, let me know the sting of wine in my palate, the wind in my face, the glitter of royal pageantry, the bright madness of slaughter – let me burn and sting and tingle with the madness of life and living, and I quest not whether Muhammad’s paradise, or Erlik’s frozen hell, or the blackness of empty oblivion lies beyond.”

As if to give point to his words, he poured himself a goblet of wine and looked interrogatively at Ousama. The Arab, who had shuddered at

Zenghi's blasphemous words, drew back in pious horror. The Atabeg emptied the goblet, smacking his lips loudly in relish, Tatar-fashion.

"I think Jabar Kal'at will fall tomorrow," he said. "Who has stood against me? Count them, Ousama – there was ibn Sadaka, and the Caliph, and the Seljuk Timurtash, and the sultan Dawud, and the king of Jerusalem, and the count of Edessa. Man after man, city after city, army after army, I broke them and brushed them from my path."

"You have waded through a sea of blood," said Ousama. "You have filled the slave-markets with Frankish girls, and the deserts with the bones of Frankish warriors. Nor have you spared your rivals among the Moslems."

"They stood in the way of my destiny," laughed the Turk, "and that destiny is to be sultan of Asia! As I will be. I have welded the swords of Irak, el Jezira, Syria and Roum, into a single blade. Now with the aid of the Greeks, all Hell can not save the Nazarenes. Slaughter? Men have seen naught; wait until I ride into Antioch and Jerusalem, sword in hand!"

"Your heart is steel," said the Arab. "Yet I have seen one touch of tenderness in you – your affection for Nejm-ed-din's son Yusef. Is there a like touch of repentance in you? Of all your deeds, is there none you regret?"

Zenghi played with a pawn in silence, and his face darkened.

"Aye," he said slowly. "It was long ago, when I broke ibn Sadaka beside the lower reaches of this very river. He had a son, Achmet, a girl-faced boy. I beat him to death with my riding-scourge. It is the one deed I could wish undone. Sometimes I dream of it."

Then with an abrupt "Enough!" he thrust aside the board, scattering the chessmen. "I would sleep," said he, and throwing himself on his cushion-heaped divan, he was instantly locked in slumber. Ousama went quietly from the tent, passing between the four giant memluks in gilded mail who stood with wide-tipped scimitars at the pavilion door.

In the castle of Jabar, the Seljuk commander held counsel with Sir Miles du Courcey. "My brother, for us the end of the road has come. The walls are crumbling, the towers leaning to their fall. Shall we not fire the castle, cut the throats of our women and children, and go forth to die like men in the dawn?"

Sir Miles shook his head. “Let us hold the walls for one more day. In a dream I saw the banners of Damascus and of Antioch marching to our aid.”

He lied in a desperate attempt to bolster up the fatalistic Seljuk. Each followed the instinct of his kind, and Miles’ was to cling with teeth and nails to the last vestige of life until the bitter end. The Seljuk bowed his head.

“If Allah wills, we will hold the walls for another day.”

Miles thought of Ellen, into whose manner something of the old vibrant spirit was beginning to steal faintly again, and in the blackness of his despair no light gleamed from earth or heaven. The finding of her had stung to life a heart long frozen; now in death he must lose her again. With the taste of bitter ashes in his mouth he bent his shoulders anew to the burden of life.

In his tent Zenghi moved restlessly. Alert as a panther, even in sleep, his instinct told him that someone was moving stealthily near him. He woke and sat up glaring. The fat eunuch Yaruktash halted suddenly, the wine jug half-way to his lips. He had thought Zenghi lay helplessly drunk when he stole into the tent to filch the liquor he loved. Zenghi snarled like a wolf, his familiar devil rising in his brain.

“Dog! Am I a fat merchant that you steal into my tent to guzzle my wine? Begone! Tomorrow I will see to you!”

Cold sweat beaded Yaruktash’s sleek hide as he fled from the royal pavilion. His fat flesh quivered with agonized anticipation of the sharp stake which would undoubtedly be his portion. In a day of cruel masters, Zenghi’s name was a byword of horror among slaves and servitors.

One of the memluks outside the tent caught Yaruktash’s arm and growled, “Why flee you, gelding?”

A great flare of light rose in the eunuch’s brain, so that he gasped at its grandeur and audacity. Why remain here to be impaled, when the whole desert was open before him, and here were men who would protect him in his flight?

“Our lord discovered me drinking his wine,” he gasped. “He threatens me with torture and death.”

The memluks laughed appreciatively, their crude humor touched by the eunuch’s fright. Then they started convulsively as Yaruktash added, “You

too are doomed. I heard him curse you for not keeping better watch, and allowing his slaves to steal his wine."

The fact that they had never been told to bar the eunuch from the royal pavilion meant nothing to the memluks, their wits frozen with sudden fear. They stood dumbly, incapable of coherent thought, their minds like empty jugs ready to be filled with the eunuch's guile. A few whispered words and they slunk away like shadows on Yaruktash's heels, leaving the pavilion unguarded.

The night waned. Midnight hovered and was gone. The moon sank below the desert hills in a welter of blood. From dreams of imperial pageantry Zenghi again awoke, to stare bewilderedly about the dim-lit pavilion. Without, all was silence that seemed suddenly tense and sinister. The prince lay in the midst of ten thousand armed men; yet he felt suddenly apart and alone, as if he were the last man left alive on a dead world. Then he saw that he was not alone. Looking somberly down on him stood a strange and alien figure. It was a man, whose rags did not hide his gaunt limbs, at which Zenghi stared appalled. They were gnarled like the twisted branches of ancient oaks, knotted with masses of muscle and thews, each of which stood out distinct, like iron cables. There was no soft flesh to lend symmetry or to mask the raw savagery of sheer power. Only years of incredible labor could have produced this terrible monument of muscular over-development. White hair hung about the great shoulders, a white beard fell upon the mighty breast. His terrible arms were folded, and he stood motionless as a statue looking down upon the stupefied Turk. His features were gaunt and deep-lined, as if cut by some mad artist's chisel from bitter, frozen rock.

"Avaunt!" gasped Zenghi, momentarily a pagan of the steppes. "Spirit of evil – ghost of the desert – demon of the hills – I fear you not!"

"Well may you speak of ghosts, Turk!" The deep hollow voice woke dim memories in Zenghi's brain. "I am the ghost of a man dead twenty years, come up from darkness deeper than the darkness of hell. Have you forgotten my promise, Prince Zenghi?"

"Who are you?" demanded the Turk.

"I am John Norwald."

"The Frank who rode with ibn Sadaka? Impossible!" ejaculated the Atabeg. "Twenty-three years ago I doomed him to the rower's bench. What galley-slave could live so long?"

“I lived,” retorted the other. “Where others died like flies, I lived. The lash that scarred my back in a thousand overlying patterns could not kill me, nor starvation, nor storm, nor pestilence, nor battle. The years have been long, Zenghi esh Shami, and the darkness deep and full of mocking voices and haunting faces. Look at my hair, Zenghi – white as hoarfrost, though I am eight years younger than yourself. Look at these monstrous talons that were hands, these knotted limbs – they have driven the weighted oars for many a thousand leagues through storm and calm. Yet I lived, Zenghi, even when my flesh cried out to end the long agony. When I fainted on the oar, it was not the ripping lash that roused me to life anew, but the hate that would not let me die. That hate has kept the soul in my tortured body for twenty-three years, dog of Tiberias. In the galleys I lost my youth, my hope, my manhood, my soul, my faith and my God. But my hate burned on, a flame that nothing could quench.

“Twenty years at the oars, Zenghi! Three years ago the galley in which I then toiled crashed on the reefs off the coast of India. All died but me, who, knowing my hour had come, burst my chains with the strength and madness of a giant, and gained the shore. My feet are yet unsteady from the shackles and the galley-bench, Zenghi, though my arms are strong beyond the belief of man. I have been on the road from India for three years. But the road ends here.”

For the first time in his life Zenghi knew fear that froze his tongue to his palate and turned the marrow in his bones to ice.

“Ho, guards!” he roared. “To me, dogs!”

“Call louder, Zenghi!” said Norwald in his hollow resounding voice. “They hear thee not. Through thy sleeping host I passed like the Angel of Death, and none saw me. Thy tent stood unguarded. Lo, mine enemy, thou art delivered into my hand, and thine hour has come!”

With the ferocity of desperation Zenghi leaped from his cushions, whipping out a dagger, but like a great gaunt tiger the Englishman was upon him, crushing him back on the divan. The Turk struck blindly, felt the blade sink deep into the other’s side; then as he wrenched the weapon free to strike again, he felt an iron grip on his wrist, and the Frank’s right hand locked on his throat, choking his cry.

As he felt the inhuman strength of his attacker, blind panic swept the Atabeg. The fingers on his wrist did not feel like human bone and flesh and sinew. They were like the steel jaws of a vise that crushed through flesh and

muscle. Over the inexorable fingers that sank into his bull-throat, blood trickled from skin torn like rotten cloth. Mad with the torture of strangulation, Zenghi tore at the wrist with his free hand, but he might have been wrenching at a steel bar welded to his throat. The massed muscles of Norwald's left arm knotted with effort, and with a sickening snap Zenghi's wrist-bones gave way. The dagger fell from his nerveless hand, and instantly Norwald caught it up and sank the point into the Atabeg's breast.

The Turk released the arm that prisoned his throat, and caught the knife-wrist, but all his desperate strength could not stay the inexorable thrust. Slowly, slowly, Norwald drove home the keen point, while the Turk writhed in soundless agony. Approaching through the mists which veiled his glazing sight, Zenghi saw a face, raw, torn and bleeding. And then the dagger-point found his heart and visions and life ended together.

Ousama, unable to sleep, approached the Atabeg’s tent, wondering at the absence of the guardsmen. He stopped short, an uncanny fear prickling the short hairs at the back of his neck, as a form came from the pavilion. He made out a tall white-bearded man, clad in rags. The Arab stretched forth a hand timidly, but dared not touch the apparition. He saw that the figure’s hand was pressed against its left side, and blood oozed darkly from between the fingers.

“Where go you, old man?” stammered the Arab, involuntarily stepping back as the white-bearded stranger fixed weird blazing eyes upon him.

“I go back to the void which gave me birth,” answered the figure in a deep ghostly voice, and as the Arab stared in bewilderment, the stranger passed on with slow, certain, unwavering steps, to vanish in the darkness.

Ousama ran into Zenghi’s tent – to halt aghast at sight of the Atabeg’s body lying stark among the torn silks and bloodstained cushions of the royal divan.

“Alas for kingly ambitions and high visions!” exclaimed the Arab. “Death is a black horse that may halt in the night by any tent, and life is more unstable than the foam on the sea! Wo for Islam, for her keenest sword is broken! Now may Christendom rejoice, for the Lion that roared against her lies lifeless!”

Like wildfire ran through the camp the word of the Atabeg’s death, and like chaff blown on the winds his followers scattered, looting the camp as they fled. The power that had welded them together was broken, and it was every man for himself, and the plunder to the strong.

The haggard defenders on the walls, lifting their notched stumps of blades for the last death-grapple, gaped as they saw the confusion in the camp, the running to and fro, the brawling, the looting and shouting, and at last the scattering over the plain of emirs and retainers alike. These hawks lived by the sword, and they had no time for the dead, however regal. They turned their steeds aside to seek a new lord, in a race for the strongest.

Stunned by the miracle, not yet understanding the cast of Fate that had saved Jabar Kal’at and Outremer, Miles du Courcey stood with Ellen and their Seljuk friend, staring down on a silent and abandoned camp, where the torn deserted tent flapped idly in the morning breeze above the blood-stained body that had been the Lion of Tiberias.

Gates of Empire

The clank of the sour sentinels on the turrets, the gusty uproar of the Spring winds, were not heard by those who revelled in the cellar of Godfrey de Courtenay’s castle; and the noise these revellers made was bottled up deafeningly within the massive walls.

A sputtering candle lighted those rugged walls, damp and uninviting, flanked with wattled casks and hogsheads over which stretched a veil of dusty cobwebs. From one barrel the head had been knocked out, and leathern drinking-jacks were immersed again and again in the foamy tide, in hands that grew increasingly unsteady.

Agnes, one of the serving-wenches, had stolen the massive iron key to the cellar from the girdle of the steward; and rendered daring by the absence of their master, a small but far from select group were making merry with characteristic heedlessness of the morrow.

Agnes, seated on the knee of the varlet Peter, beat erratic time with a jack to a ribald song both were bawling in different tunes and keys. The ale slopped over the rim of the wobbling jack and down Peter’s collar, a circumstance he was beyond noticing.

The other wench, fat Marge, rolled on her bench and slapped her ample thighs in uproarious appreciation of a spicy tale just told by Giles Hobson. This individual might have been the lord of the castle from his manner, instead of a vagabond rapscallion tossed by every wind of adversity. Tilted back on a barrel, booted feet propped on another, he loosened the belt that girdled his capacious belly in its worn leather jerkin, and plunged his muzzle once more into the frothing ale.

“Giles, by Saint Withold his beard,” quoth Marge, “madder rogue never wore steel. The very ravens that pick your bones on the gibbet tree will burst their sides a-laughing. I hail ye – prince of all bawdy liars!”

She flourished a huge pewter pot and drained it as stoutly as any man in the realm.

At this moment another reveller, returning from an errand, came into the scene. The door at the head of the stairs admitted a wobbly figure in close-fitting velvet. Through the briefly opened door sounded noises of the night – slap of hangings somewhere in the house, sucking and flapping in the wind that whipped through the crevices; a faint disgruntled hail from a watchman on a tower. A gust of wind whooped down the stair and set the candle to dancing.

Guillaume, the page, shoved the door shut and made his way with groggy care down the rude stone steps. He was not so drunk as the others, simply because, what of his extreme youth, he lacked their capacity for fermented liquor.

“What’s the time, boy?” demanded Peter.

“Long past midnight,” the page answered, groping unsteadily for the open cask. “The whole castle is asleep, save for the watchmen. But I heard a clatter of hoofs through the wind and rain; methinks ’tis Sir Godfrey returning.”

“Let him return and be damned!” shouted Giles, slapping Marge’s fat haunch resoundingly. “He may be lord of the keep, but at present we are keepers of the cellar! More ale! Agnes, you little slut, another song!”

“Nay, more tales!” clamored Marge. “Our mistress’s brother, Sir Guiscard de Chastillon, has told grand tales of Holy Land and the infidels, but by Saint Dunstan, Giles’ lies outshine the knight’s truths!”

“Slander not a – hic! – holy man as has been on pilgrimage and Crusade,” hiccuped Peter. “Sir Guiscard has seen Jerusalem, and foughten beside the King of Palestine – how many years?”

“Ten year come May Day, since he sailed to Holy Land,” said Agnes. “Lady Eleanor had not seen him in all that time, till he rode up to the gate yesterday morn. Her husband, Sir Godfrey, never has seen him.”

“And wouldn’t know him?” mused Giles; “nor Sir Guiscard him?”

He blinked, raking a broad hand through his sandy mop. He was drunker than even he realized. The world spun like a top and his head seemed to be dancing dizzily on his shoulders. Out of the fumes of ale and a vagrant spirit, a madcap idea was born.

A roar of laughter burst gustily from Giles' lips. He reeled upright, spilling his jack in Marge's lap and bringing a burst of rare profanity from her. He smote a barrelhead with his open hand, strangling with mirth.

"Good lack!" squawked Agnes. "Are you daft, man?"

"A jest!" The roof reverberated to his bull's bellow. "Oh, Saint Withold, a jest! Sir Guiscard knows not his brother-in-law, and Sir Godfrey is now at the gate. Hark ye!"

Four heads, bobbing erratically, inclined toward him as he whispered as if the rude walls might hear. An instant's bleary silence was followed by boisterous guffaws. They were in the mood to follow the maddest course suggested to them. Only Guillaume felt some misgivings, but he was swept away by the alcoholic fervor of his companions.

"Oh, a devil's own jest!" cried Marge, planting a loud, moist kiss on Giles' ruddy cheek. "On, rogues, to the sport!"

"En avant!" bellowed Giles, drawing his sword and waving it unsteadily, and the five weaved up the stairs, stumbling, blundering, and lurching against one another. They kicked open the door, and shortly were running erratically up the wide hall, giving tongue like a pack of hounds.

The castles of the Twelfth Century, fortresses rather than mere dwellings, were built for defense, not comfort.

The hall through which the drunken band was hallooing was broad, lofty, windy, strewn with rushes, now but faintly lighted by the dying embers in a great ill-ventilated fireplace. Rude, sail-like hangings along the walls rippled in the wind that found its way through. Hounds, sleeping under the great table, woke yelping as they were trodden on by blundering feet, and added their clamor to the din.

This din roused Sir Guiscard de Chastillon from dreams of Acre and the sun-drenched plains of Palestine. He bounded up, sword in hand, supposing himself to be beset by Saracen raiders, then realized where he was. But events seemed to be afoot. A medley of shouts and shrieks clamored outside his door, and on the stout oak panels boomed a rain of blows that bade fair

to burst the portal inward. The knight heard his name called loudly and urgently.

Putting aside his trembling squire, he ran to the door and cast it open. Sir Guiscard was a tall gaunt man, with a great beak of a nose and cold grey eyes. Even in his shirt he was a formidable figure. He blinked ferociously at the group limned dimly in the glow from the coals at the other end of the hall. There seemed to be women, children, a fat man with a sword.

This fat man was bawling: “Succor, Sir Guiscard, succor! The castle is forced, and we are all dead men! The robbers of Horsham Wood are within the hall itself!”

Sir Guiscard heard the unmistakable tramp of mailed feet, saw vague figures coming into the hall – figures on whose steel the faint light gleamed redly. Still mazed by slumber, but ferocious, he went into furious action.

Sir Godfrey de Courtenay, returning to his keep after many hours of riding through foul weather, anticipated only rest and ease in his own castle. Having vented his irritation by roundly cursing the sleepy grooms who shambled up to attend his horses, and were too bemused to tell him of his guest, he dismissed his men-at-arms and strode into the donjon, followed by his squires and the gentlemen of his retinue. Scarcely had he entered when the devil’s own bedlam burst loose in the hall. He heard a wild stampede of feet, crash of overturned benches, baying of dogs, and an uproar of strident voices, over which one bull-like bellow triumphed.

Swearing amazedly, he ran up the hall, followed by his knights, when a ravening maniac, naked but for a shirt, burst on him, sword in hand, howling like a werewolf.

Sparks flew from Sir Godfrey’s basinet beneath the madman’s furious strokes, and the lord of the castle almost succumbed to the ferocity of that onslaught before he could draw his own sword. He fell back, bellowing for his men-at-arms. But the madman was yelling louder than he, and from all sides swarmed other lunatics in shirts who assailed Sir Godfrey’s dumfounded gentlemen with howling frenzy.

The castle was in an uproar – lights flashing up, dogs howling, women screaming, men cursing, and over all the clash of steel and the stamp of mailed feet.

The conspirators, sobered by what they had raised, scattered in all directions, seeking hiding-places – all except Giles Hobson. His state of intoxication was too magnificent to be perturbed by any such trivial scene.

He admired his handiwork for a space; then, finding swords flashing too close to his head for comfort, withdrew, and following some instinct, departed for a hiding-place known to him of old. There he found with gentle satisfaction that he had all the time retained a cobwebbed bottle in his hand. This he emptied, and its contents, coupled with what had already found its way down his gullet, plunged him into extinction for an amazing period. Tranquilly he snored under the straw, while events took place above and around him, and matters moved not slowly.

There in the straw Friar Ambrose found him just as dusk was falling after a harassed and harrying day. The friar, ruddy and well paunched, shook the unpenitent one into bleary wakefulness.

"The saints defend us!" said Ambrose. "Up to your old tricks again! I thought to find you here. They have been searching the castle all day for you; they searched these stables, too. Well that you were hidden beneath a very mountain of hay."

"They do me too much honor," yawned Giles. "Why should they search for me?"

The friar lifted his hands in pious horror.

"Saint Denis is my refuge against Sathanas and his works! Is it not known how you were the ringleader in that madcap prank last night that pitted poor Sir Guiscard against his sister's husband?"

"Saint Dunstan!" quoth Giles, expectorating dryly. "How I thirst! Were any slain?"

"No, by the providence of God. But there is many a broken crown and bruised rib this day. Sir Godfrey nigh fell at the first onset, for Sir Guiscard is a woundy swordsman. But our lord being in full armor, he presently dealt Sir Guiscard a shrewd cut over the pate, whereby blood did flow in streams, and Sir Guiscard blasphemed in a manner shocking to hear. What had then chanced, God only knows, but Lady Eleanor, awakened by the noise, ran forth in her shift, and seeing her husband and her brother at swords' points, she ran between them and bespoke them in words not to be repeated. Verily, a flailing tongue hath our mistress when her wrath is stirred.

"So understanding was reached, and a leech was fetched for Sir Guiscard and such of the henchmen as had suffered scathe. Then followed much discussion, and Sir Guiscard had recognized you as one of those who

banged on his door. Then Guillaume was discovered hiding, as from a guilty conscience, and he confessed all, putting the blame on you. Ah me, such a day as it has been!

"Poor Peter in the stocks since dawn, and all the villeins and serving-wenches and villagers gathered to clod him – they but just now left off, and a sorry sight he is, with nose a-bleeding, face skinned, an eye closed, and broken eggs in his hair and dripping over his features. Poor Peter!

"And as for Agnes, Marge and Guillaume, they have had whipping enough to content them all a lifetime. It would be hard to say which of them has the sorest posterior. But it is you, Giles, the masters wish. Sir Guiscard swears that only your life will anyways content him."

"Hmmmm," ruminated Giles. He rose unsteadily, brushed the straw from his garments, hitched up his belt and stuck his disreputable bonnet on his head at a cocky angle.

The friar watched him gloomily. "Peter stocked, Guillaume birched, Marge and Agnes whipped – what should be your punishment?"

"Methinks I'll do penance by a long pilgrimage," said Giles.

"You'll never get through the gates," predicted Ambrose.

"True," sighed Giles. "A friar may pass at will, where an honest man is halted by suspicion and prejudice. As further penance, lend me your robe."

"My robe?" exclaimed the friar. "You are a fool – "

A heavy fist *clunked* against his fat jaw, and he collapsed with a whistling sigh.

A few minutes later a lout in the outer ward, taking aim with a rotten egg at the dilapidated figure in the stocks, checked his arm as a robed and hooded shape emerged from the stables and crossed the open space with slow steps. The shoulders drooped as from a weight of weariness, the head was bent forward; so much so, in fact, that the features were hidden by the hood.

"The lout doffed his shabby cap and made a clumsy leg.

"God go wi' 'ee, good faither," he said.

"*Pax vobiscum*, my son," came the answer, low and muffled from the depths of the hood.

The lout shook his head sympathetically as the robed figure moved on, unhindered, in the direction of the postern gate.

"Poor Friar Ambrose," quoth the lout. "He takes the sin o' the world so much to heart; there 'ee go, fair bowed down by the wickedness o' men."

He sighed, and again took aim at the glum countenance that glowered above the stocks.

Through the blue glitter of the Mediterranean wallowed a merchant galley, clumsy, broad in the beam. Her square sail hung limp on her one thick mast. The oarsmen, sitting on the benches which flanked the waist deck on either side, tugged at the long oars, bending forward and heaving back in machine-like unison. Sweat stood out on their sun-burnt skin, their muscles rolled evenly. From the interior of the hull came a chatter of voices, the complaint of animals, a reek as of barnyards and stables. This scent was observable some distance to leeward. To the south the blue waters spread out like molten sapphire. To the north, the gleaming sweep was broken by an island that reared up white cliffs crowned with dark green. Dignity, cleanliness and serenity reigned over all, except where that smelly, ungainly tub lurched through the foaming water, by sound and scent advertising the presence of man.

Below the waist deck passengers, squatted among bundles, were cooking food over small braziers. Smoke mingled with a reek of sweat and garlic. Horses, penned in a narrow space, whinnied wretchedly. Sheep, pigs and chickens added their aroma to the smells.

Presently, amidst the babble below decks, a new sound floated up to the people above – members of the crew, and the wealthier passengers who shared the *patrono*'s cabin. The voice of the *patrono* came to them, strident with annoyance, answered by a loud rough voice with an alien accent.

The Venetian captain, prodding among the butts and bales of the cargo, had discovered a stowaway – a fat, sandy-haired man in worn leather, snoring bibulously among the barrels.

Ensued an impassioned oratory in lurid Italian, the burden of which at last focussed in a demand that the stranger pay for his passage.

"Pay?" echoed that individual, running thick fingers through unkempt locks. "What should I pay with, Thin-shanks? Where am I? What ship is this? Where are we going?"

"This is the *San Stefano*, bound for Cyprus from Palermo."

"Oh, yes," muttered the stowaway. "I remember. I came aboard at Palermo – lay down beside a wine cask between the bales – "

The *patrono* hastily inspected the cask and shrieked with new passion.

“Dog! You’ve drunk it all!”

“How long have we been at sea?” demanded the intruder.

“Long enough to be out of sight of land,” snarled the other. “Pig, how can a man lie drunk so long – ”

“No wonder my belly’s empty,” muttered the other. “I’ve lain among the bales, and when I woke, I’d drink till I fell asleep again. Hmmm!”

“Money!” clamored the Italian. “Bezants for your fare!”

“Bezants!” snorted the other. “I haven’t a penny to my name.”

“Then overboard you go,” grimly promised the *patrono*. “There’s no room for beggars aboard the *San Stefano*.”

That struck a spark. The stranger gave vent to a war-like snort, and tugged at his sword.

“Throw me overboard into all that water? Not while Giles Hobson can wield blade. A free-born Englishman is as good as any velvet-breeched Italian. Call your bullies and watch me bleed them!”

From the deck came a loud call, strident with sudden fright. “Galleys off the starboard bow! Saracens!”

A howl burst from the *patrono*’s lips and his face went ashy. Abandoning the dispute at hand, he wheeled and rushed up on deck. Giles Hobson followed and gaped about him at the anxious brown faces of the rowers, the frightened countenances of the passengers – Latin priests, merchants and pilgrims. Following their gaze, he saw three long low galleys shooting across the blue expanse toward them. They were still some distance away, but the people on the *San Stefano* could hear the faint clash of cymbals, see the banners stream out from the mast heads. The oars dipped into the blue water, came up shining silver.

“Put her about and steer for the island!” yelled the *patrono*. “If we can reach it, we may hide and save our lives. The galley is lost – and all the cargo! Saints defend me!” He wept and wrung his hands, less from fear than from disappointed avarice.

The *San Stefano* wallowed cumbrously about and waddled hurriedly toward the white cliffs jutting in the sunlight. The slim galleys came up, shooting through the waves like water snakes. The space of dancing blue between the *San Stefano* and the cliffs narrowed, but more swiftly narrowed the space between the merchant and the raiders. Arrows began to arch

through the air and patter on the deck. One struck and quivered near Giles Hobson's boot, and he gave back as if from a serpent. The fat Englishman mopped perspiration from his brow. His mouth was dry, his head throbbed, his belly heaved. Suddenly he was violently sea-sick.

The oarsmen bent their backs, gasped, heaved mightily, seeming almost to jerk the awkward craft out of the water. Arrows, no longer arching, raked the deck. A man howled; another sank down without a word. An oarsman flinched from a shaft through his shoulder, and faltered in his stroke. Panic-stricken, the rowers began to lose rhythm. The *San Stefano* lost headway and rolled more wildly, and the passengers sent up a wail. From the raiders came yells of exultation. They separated in a fan-shaped formation meant to envelop the doomed galley.

On the merchant's deck the priests were shriving and absolving.

"Holy Saints grant me – " gasped a gaunt Pisan, kneeling on the boards – convulsively he clasped the feathered shaft that suddenly vibrated in his breast, then slumped sidewise and lay still.

An arrow thumped into the rail over which Giles Hobson hung, quivered near his elbow. He paid no heed. A hand was laid on his shoulder. Gagging, he turned his head, lifted a green face to look into the troubled eyes of a priest.

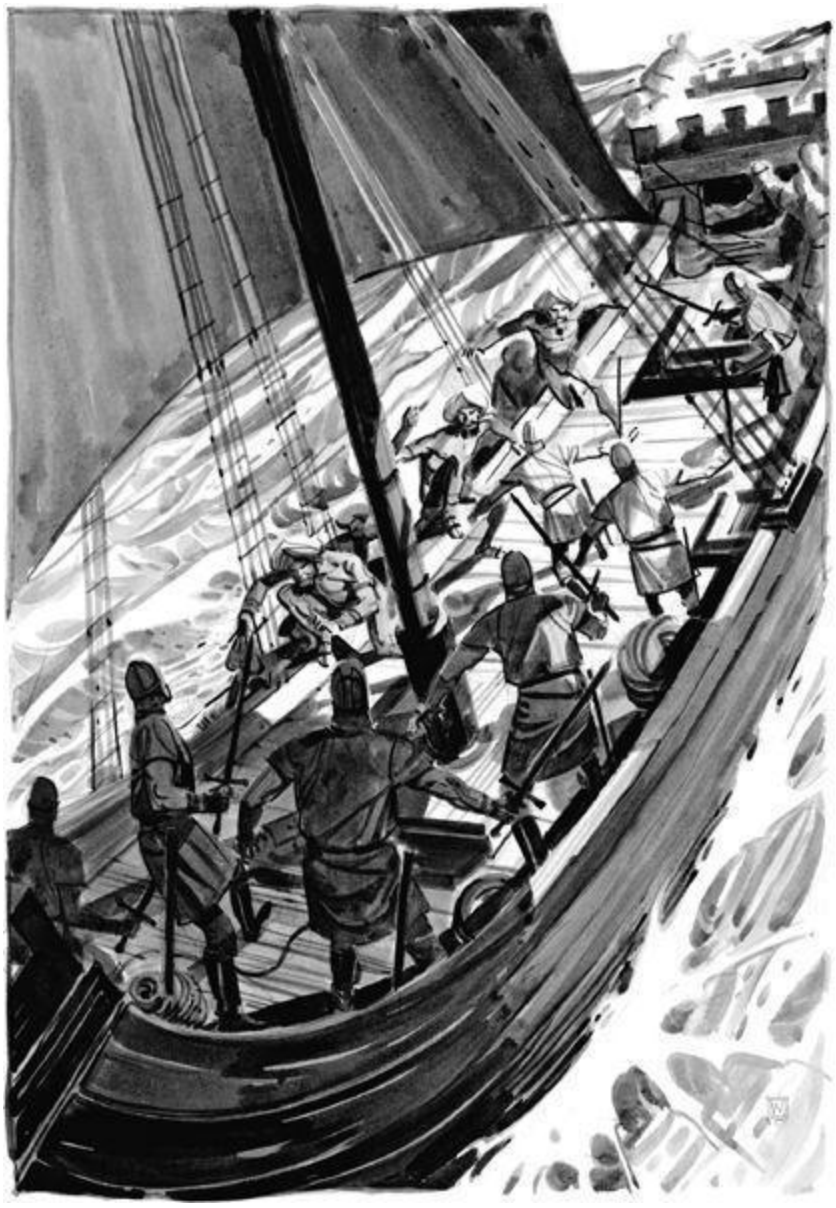
"My son, this may be the hour of death; confess your sins and I will shrive you."

"The only one I can think of," gasped Giles miserably, "is that I mauled a priest and stole his robe to flee England in."

"Alas, my son," the priest began, then cringed back with a low moan. He seemed to bow to Giles; his head inclining still further, he sank to the deck. From a dark welling spot on his side jutted a Saracen arrow.

Giles gaped about him; on either hand a long slim galley was sweeping in to lay the *San Stefano* aboard. Even as he looked, the third galley, the one in the middle of the triangular formation, rammed the merchant ship with a deafening splintering of timber. The steel beak cut through the bulwarks, rending apart the stern cabin. The concussion rolled men off their feet. Others, caught and crushed in the collision, died howling awfully. The other raiders ground alongside, and their steel-shod prows sheared through the

banks of oars, twisting the shafts out of the oarsmen’s hands, crushing the ribs of the wielders.



The grappling hooks bit into the bulwarks, and over the rail came dark naked men with scimitars in their hands, their eyes blazing. They were met by a dazed remnant who fought back desperately.

Giles Hobson fumbled out his sword, strode groggily forward. A dark shape flashed at him out of the melee. He got a dazed impression of glittering eyes, and a curved blade hissing down. He caught the stroke on his sword, staggering from the spark-showering impact. Braced on wide

straddling legs, he drove his sword into the pirate's belly. Blood and entrails gushed forth, and the dying corsair dragged his slayer to the deck with him in his throes.

Feet booted and bare stamped on Giles Hobson as he strove to rise. A curved dagger hooked at his kidneys, caught in his leather jerkin and ripped the garment from hem to collar. He rose, shaking the tatters from him. A dusky hand locked in his ragged shirt, a mace hovered over his head. With a frantic jerk, Giles pitched backward, to a sound of rending cloth, leaving the torn shirt in his captor's hand. The mace met empty air as it descended, and the wielder went to his knees from the wasted blow. Giles fled along the blood-washed deck, twisting and ducking to avoid struggling knots of fighters.

A handful of defenders huddled in the door of the forecastle. The rest of the galley was in the hands of the triumphant Saracens. They swarmed over the deck, down into the waist. The animals squealed piteously as their throats were cut. Other screams marked the end of the women and children dragged from their hiding-places among the cargo.

In the door of the forecastle the blood-stained survivors parried and thrust with notched swords. The pirates hemmed them in, yelping mockingly, thrusting forward their pikes, drawing back, springing in to hack and slash.

Giles sprang for the rail, intending to dive and swim for the island. A quick step behind him warned him in time to wheel and duck a scimitar. It was wielded by a stout man of medium height, resplendent in silvered chain-mail and chased helmet, crested with egret plumes.

Sweat misted the fat Englishman's sight; his wind was short; his belly heaved, his legs trembled. The Moslem cut at his head. Giles parried, struck back. His blade clanged against the chief's mail. Something like a white-hot brand seared his temple, and he was blinded by a rush of blood. Dropping his sword, he pitched head-first against the Saracen, bearing him to the deck. The Moslem writhed and cursed, but Giles' thick arms clamped desperately about him.

Suddenly a wild shout went up. There was a rush of feet across the deck. Men began to leap over the rail, to cast loose the boarding-irons. Giles' captive yelled stridently, and men raced across the deck toward him. Giles released him, ran like a bulky cat along the bulwarks, and scrambled up over the roof of the shattered poop cabin. None heeded him. Men naked but for *tarboushes* hauled the mailed chieftain to his feet and rushed him across

the deck while he raged and blasphemed, evidently wishing to continue the contest. The Saracens were leaping into their own galleys and pushing away. And Giles, crouching on the splintered cabin roof, saw the reason.

Around the western promontory of the island they had been trying to reach, came a squadron of great red *dromonds*, with battle-castles rearing at prow and stern. Helmets and spear-heads glittered in the sun. Trumpets blared, drums boomed. From each mast-head streamed a long banner bearing the emblem of the Cross.

From the survivors aboard the *San Stefano* rose a shout of joy. The galleys were racing southward. The nearest *dromond* swung ponderously alongside, and brown faces framed in steel looked over the rail.

“Ahoy, there!” rang a stern-voiced command. “You are sinking; stand by to come aboard.”

Giles Hobson started violently at that voice. He gaped up at the battle-castle towering above the *San Stefano*. A helmeted head bent over the bulwark, a pair of cold grey eyes met his. He saw a great beak of a nose, a scar seaming the face from the ear down the rim of the jaw.

Recognition was mutual. A year had not dulled Sir Guiscard de Chastillon’s resentment.

“So!” The yell rang bloodthirstily in Giles Hobson’s ears. “At last I have found you, rogue – ”

Giles wheeled, kicked off his boots, ran to the edge of the roof. He left it in a long dive, shot into the blue water with a tremendous splash. His head bobbed to the surface, and he struck out for the distant cliffs in long pawing strokes.

A mutter of surprise rose from the *dromond*, but Sir Guiscard smiled sourly.

“A bow, varlet,” he commanded.

It was placed in his hands. He nocked the arrow, waited until Giles’ dripping head appeared again in a shallow trough between the waves. The bowstring twanged, the arrow flashed through the sunlight like a silver beam. Giles Hobson threw up his arms and disappeared. Nor did Sir Guiscard see him rise again, though the knight watched the waters for some time.

To Shawar, vizier of Egypt, in his palace in el-Fustat, came a gorgeously robed eunuch who, with many abased supplications, as the due of the most powerful man in the caliphate, announced: “The Emir Asad ed din Shirkuh, lord of Emesa and Rahba, general of the armies of Nour ed din, Sultan of Damascus, has returned from the ships of el Ghazi with a Nazarene captive, and desires audience.”

A nod of acquiescence was the vizier’s only sign, but his slim white fingers twitched at his jewel-encrusted white girdle – sure evidence of mental unrest.

Shawar was an Arab, a slim, handsome figure, with the keen dark eyes of his race. He wore the silken robes and pearl-sewn turban of his office as if he had been born to them – instead of to the black felt tents from which his sagacity had lifted him.

The Emir Shirkuh entered like a storm, booming forth his salutations in a voice more fitted for the camp than for the council chamber. He was a powerfully built man of medium height, with a face like a hawk’s. His *khalat* was of watered silk, worked with gold thread, but like his voice, his hard body seemed more fitted for the harness of war than the garments of peace. Middle age had dulled none of the restless fire in his dark eyes.

With him was a man whose sandy hair and wide blue eyes contrasted incongruously with the voluminous bag trousers, silken *khalat* and turned-up slippers which adorned him.

“I trust that Allah granted you fortune upon the sea, *ya khawand*?” courteously inquired the vizier.

“Of a sort,” admitted Shirkuh, casting himself down on the cushions. “We fared far, Allah knows, and at first my guts were like to gush out of my mouth with the galloping of the ship, which went up and down like a foundered camel. But later Allah willed that the sickness should pass.

“We sank a few wretched pilgrims’ galleys and sent to hell the infidels therein – which was good, but the loot was wretched stuff. But look ye, lord vizier, did you ever see a Caphar like to this man?”

The man returned the vizier’s searching stare with wide guileless eyes.

“Such as he I have seen among the Franks of Jerusalem,” Shawar decided.

Shirkuh grunted and began to munch grapes with scant ceremony, tossing a bunch to his captive.

“Near a certain island we sighted a galley,” he said, between mouthfuls, “and we ran upon it and put the folk to the sword. Most of them were miserable fighters, but this man cut his way clear and would have sprung overboard had I not intercepted him. By Allah, he proved himself strong as a bull! My ribs are yet bruised from his hug.

“But in the midst of the melee up galloped a herd of ships full of Christian warriors, bound – as we later learned – for Ascalon; Frankish adventurers seeking their fortune in Palestine. We put the spurs to our galleys, and as I looked back I saw the man I had been fighting leap overboard and swim toward the cliffs. A knight on a Nazarene ship shot an arrow at him and he sank, to his death, I supposed.

“Our water butts were nearly empty. We did not run far. As soon as the Frankish ships were out of sight over the skyline, we beat back to the island for fresh water. And we found, fainting on the beach, a fat, naked, red-haired man whom I recognized as he whom I had fought. The arrow had not touched him; he had dived deep and swum far under the water. But he had bled much from a cut I had given him on the head, and was nigh dead from exhaustion.

“Because he had fought me well, I took him into my cabin and revived him, and in the days that followed he learned to speak the speech we of Islam hold with the accursed Nazarenes. He told me that he was a bastard son of the king of England, and that enemies had driven him from his father’s court, and were hunting him over the world. He swore the king his father would pay a mighty ransom for him, so I make you a present of him. For me, the pleasure of the cruise is enough. To you shall go the ransom the *malik* of England pays for his son. He is a merry companion, who can tell a tale, quaff a flagon, and sing a song as well as any man I have ever known.”

Shawar scanned Giles Hobson with new interest. In that rubicund countenance he failed to find any evidence of royal parentage, but reflected that few Franks showed royal lineage in their features: ruddy, freckled, light-haired, the western lords looked much alike to the Arab.

He turned his attention again to Shirkuh, who was of more importance than any wandering Frank, royal or common. The old war-dog, with shocking lack of formality, was humming a Kurdish war song under his

breath as he poured himself a goblet of Shiraz wine – the Shiite rulers of Egypt were no stricter in their morals than were their Mameluke successors.

Apparently Shirkuh had no thought in the world except to satisfy his thirst, but Shawar wondered what craft was revolving behind that bluff exterior. In another man Shawar would have despised the Emir's restless vitality as an indication of an inferior mentality. But the Kurdish right-hand man of Nour ed din was no fool. The vizier wondered if Shirkuh had embarked on that wild-goose chase with el Ghazi's corsairs merely because his restless energy would not let him be quiet, even during a visit to the caliph's court, or if there was a deeper meaning behind his voyaging. Shawar always looked for hidden motives, even in trivial things. He had reached his position by ignoring no possibility of intrigue. Moreover, events were stirring in the womb of Destiny in that early spring of 1167 A.D.

Shawar thought of Dirgham's bones rotting in a ditch near the chapel of Sitta Nefisa, and he smiled and said: "A thousand thanks for your gifts, my lord. In return a jade goblet filled with pearls shall be carried to your chamber. Let this exchange of gifts symbolize the everlasting endurance of our friendship."

"Allah fill thy mouth with gold, lord," boomed Shirkuh, rising; "I go to drink wine with my officers, and tell them lies of my voyagings. Tomorrow I ride for Damascus. Allah be with thee!"

"And with thee, *ya khawand*."

After the Kurd's springy footfalls had ceased to rustle the thick carpets of the halls, Shawar motioned Giles to sit beside him on the cushions.

"What of your ransom?" he asked, in the Norman French he had learned through contact with the Crusaders.

"The king my father will fill this chamber with gold," promptly answered Giles. "His enemies have told him I was dead. Great will be the joy of the old man to learn the truth."

So saying, Giles retired behind a wine goblet and racked his brain for bigger and better lies. He had spun this fantasy for Shirkuh, thinking to make himself sound too valuable to be killed. Later – well, Giles lived for today, with little thought of the morrow.

Shawar watched, in some fascination, the rapid disappearance of the goblet's contents down his prisoner's gullet.

“You drink like a French baron,” commented the Arab.

“I am the prince of all topers,” answered Giles modestly – and with more truth than was contained in most of his boastings.

“Shirkuh, too, loves wine,” went on the vizier. “You drank with him?”

“A little. He wouldn’t get drunk, lest we sight a Christian ship. But we emptied a few flagons. A little wine loosens his tongue.”

Shawar’s narrow dark head snapped up; that was news to him.

“He talked? Of what?”

“Of his ambitions.”

“And what are they?” Shawar held his breath.

“To be Caliph of Egypt,” answered Giles, exaggerating the Kurd’s actual words, as was his habit. Shirkuh had talked wildly, though rather incoherently.

“Did he mention me?” demanded the vizier.

“He said he held you in the hollow of his hand,” said Giles, truthfully, for a wonder.

Shawar fell silent; somewhere in the palace a lute twanged and a black girl lifted a weird whining song of the South. Fountains splashed silverly, and there was a flutter of pigeons’ wings.

“If I send emissaries to Jerusalem his spies will tell him,” murmured Shawar to himself. “If I slay or constrain him, Nour ed din will consider it cause for war.”

He lifted his head and stared at Giles Hobson.

“You call yourself king of topers; can you best the Emir Shirkuh in a drinking-bout?”

“In the palace of the king, my father,” said Giles, “in one night I drank fifty barons under the table, the least of which was a mightier toper than Shirkuh.”

“Would you win your freedom without ransom?”

“Aye, by Saint Withold!”

“You can scarcely know much of Eastern politics, being but newly come into these parts. But Egypt is the keystone of the arch of empire. It is coveted by Amalric, king of Jerusalem, and Nour ed din, sultan of Damascus. Ibn Ruzzik, and after him Dirgham, and after him, I, have played one against the other. By Shirkuh’s aid I overthrew Dirgham; by Amalric’s aid, I drove out Shirkuh. It is a perilous game, for I can trust neither.

“Nour ed din is cautious. Shirkuh is the man to fear. I think he came here professing friendship in order to spy me out, to lull my suspicions. Even now his army may be moving on Egypt.

“If he boasted to you of his ambitions and power, it is a sure sign that he feels secure in his plots. It is necessary that I render him helpless for a few hours; yet I dare not do him harm without true knowledge of whether his hosts are actually on the march. So this is your part.”

Giles understood and a broad grin lit his ruddy face, and he licked his lips sensuously.

Shawar clapped his hands and gave orders, and presently, at request, Shirkuh entered, carrying his silk-girdled belly before him like an emperor of India.

“Our royal guest,” purred Shawar, “has spoken of his prowess with the wine-cup. Shall we allow a Caphar to go home and boast among his people that he sat above the Faithful in anything? Who is more capable of humbling his pride than the Mountain Lion?”

“A drinking-bout?” Shirkuh’s laugh was gusty as a sea blast. “By the beard of Muhammad, it likes me well! Come, Giles ibn Malik, let us to the quaffing!”

A procession began, of slaves bearing golden vessels brimming with sparkling nectar.…

During his captivity on el Ghazi’s galley, Giles had become accustomed to the heady wine of the East. But his blood was boiling in his veins, his head was singing, and the gold-barred chamber was revolving to his dizzy gaze before Shirkuh, his voice trailing off in the midst of an incoherent song, slumped sidewise on his cushions, the gold beaker tumbling from his fingers.

Shawar leaped into frantic activity. At his clap Sudanese slaves entered, naked giants with gold ear-rings and silk loin-clouts.

“Carry him into the alcove and lay him on a divan,” he ordered. “Lord Giles, can you ride?”

Giles rose, reeling like a ship in a high wind.

“I’ll hold to the mane,” he hiccuped. “But why should I ride?”

“To bear my message to Amalric,” snapped Shawar. “Here it is, sealed in a silken packet, telling him that Shirkuh means to conquer Egypt, and

offering him payment in return for aid. Amalric distrusts me, but he will listen to one of the royal blood of his own race, who tells him of Shirkuh's boasts."

"Aye," muttered Giles groggily, "royal blood; my grandfather was a horse-boy in the royal stables."

"What did you say?" demanded Shawar, not understanding, then went on before Giles could answer. "Shirkuh has played into our hands. He will lie senseless for hours, and while he lies there, you will be riding for Palestine. He will not ride for Damascus tomorrow; he will be sick of overdrunkenness. I dared not imprison him, or even drug his wine. I dare make no move until I reach an agreement with Amalric. But Shirkuh is safe for the time being, and you will reach Amalric before he reaches Nour ed din. Haste!"

In the courtyard outside sounded the clink of harness, the impatient stamp of horses. Voices blurred in swift whispers. Footfalls faded away through the halls. Alone in the alcove, Shirkuh unexpectedly sat upright. He shook his head violently, buffeted it with his hands as if to clear away the clinging cobwebs. He reeled up, catching at the arras for support. But his beard bristled in an exultant grin. He seemed bursting with a triumphant whoop he could scarcely restrain. Stumblingly he made his way to a gold-barred window. Under his massive hands the thin gold rods twisted and buckled. He tumbled through, pitching head-first to the ground in the midst of a great rose bush. Oblivious of bruises and scratches, he rose, careening like a ship on a tack, and oriented himself. He was in a broad garden; all about him waved great white blossoms; a breeze shook the palm leaves, and the moon was rising.

None halted him as he scaled the wall, though thieves skulking in the shadows eyed his rich garments avidly as he lurched through the deserted streets.

By devious ways he came to his own quarters and kicked his slaves awake.

"Horses, Allah curse you!" His voice crackled with exultation.

Ali, his captain of horse, came from the shadows.

"What now, lord?"

“The desert and Syria beyond!” roared Shirkuh, dealing him a terrific buffet on the back. “Shawar has swallowed the bait! Allah, how drunk I am! The world reels – but the stars are mine!

“That bastard Giles rides to Amalric – I heard Shawar give him his instructions as I lay in feigned slumber. We have forced the vizier’s hand! Now Nour ed din will not hesitate, when his spies bring him news from Jerusalem of the marching of the iron men! I fumed in the caliph’s court, checkmated at every turn by Shawar, seeking a way. I went into the galleys of the corsairs to cool my brain, and Allah gave into my hands a red-haired tool! I filled the lord Giles full of ‘drunken’ boastings, hoping he would repeat them to Shawar, and that Shawar would take fright and send for Amalric – which would force our overly cautious sultan to act. Now follow marching and war and the glutting of ambition. But let us ride, in the devil’s name!”

A few minutes later the Emir and his small retinue were clattering through the shadowy streets, past gardens that slept, a riot of color under the moon, lapping six-storied palaces that were dreams of pink marble and lapis lazuli and gold.

At a small, secluded gate, a single sentry bawled a challenge and lifted his pike.

“Dog!” Shirkuh reined his steed back on its haunches and hung over the Egyptian like a silk-clad cloud of death. “It is Shirkuh, your master’s guest!”

“But my orders are to allow none to pass without written order, signed and sealed by the vizier,” protested the soldier. “What shall I say to Shawar _ ”

“You will say naught,” prophesied Shirkuh. “The dead speak not.”

His scimitar gleamed and fell, and the soldier crumpled, cut through helmet and head.

“Open the gate, Ali,” laughed Shirkuh. “It is Fate that rides tonight – Fate and Destiny!”

In a cloud of moon-bathed dust they whirled out of the gate and over the plain. On the rocky shoulder of Mukattam, Shirkuh drew rein to gaze back over the city, which lay like a legendary dream under the moonlight, a waste of masonry and stone and marble, splendor and squalor merging in the moonlight, magnificence blent with ruin. To the south the dome of Imam Esh Shafi’y shone beneath the moon; to the north loomed up the

gigantic pile of the Castle of El Kahira, its walls carved blackly out of the white moonlight. Between them lay the remains and ruins of three capitals of Egypt; palaces with their mortar yet undried reared beside crumbling walls haunted only by bats.

Shirkuh laughed, and yelled with pure joy. His horse reared and his scimitar glittered in the air.

“A bride in cloth-of-gold! Await my coming, oh Egypt, for when I come again, it will be with spears and horsemen, to seize ye in my hands!”

Allah willed it that Amalric, king of Jerusalem, should be in Darum, personally attending to the fortifying of that small desert outpost, when the envoys from Egypt rode through the gates. A restless, alert and wary king was Amalric, bred to war and intrigue.

In the castle hall the Egyptian emissaries salaamed before him like corn bending before a wind, and Giles Hobson, grotesque in his dusty silks and white turban, louted awkwardly and presented the sealed packet of Shawar.

Amalric took it with his own hands and read it, striding absently up and down the hall, a gold-maned lion, stately, yet dangerously supple.

“What talk is this of royal bastards?” he demanded suddenly, staring at Giles, who was nervous but not embarrassed.

“A lie to cozen the paynim, your majesty,” admitted the Englishman, secure in his belief that the Egyptians did not understand Norman French. “I am no illegitimate of the blood, only the honest-born younger son of a baron of the Scottish marches.”

Giles did not care to be kicked into the scullery with the rest of the varlets. The nearer the purple, the richer the pickings. It seemed safe to assume that the king of Jerusalem was not over-familiar with the nobility of the Scottish border.

“I have seen many a younger son who lacked coat-armor, war-cry and wealth, but was none the less worthy,” said Amalric. “You shall not go unrewarded. Messer Giles, know you the import of this message?”

“The wazeer Shawar spoke to me at some length,” admitted Giles.

“The ultimate fate of Outremer hangs in the balance,” said Amalric. “If the same man holds both Egypt and Syria, we are caught in the jaws of the vise. Better for Shawar to rule in Egypt, than Nour ed din. We march for Cairo. Would you accompany the host?”

“In sooth, lord,” began Giles, “it has been a wearisome time – ”

“True,” broke in Amalric. “ ’Twere better that you ride on to Acre and rest from your travels. I will give you a letter for the lord commanding there. Sir Guiscard de Chastillon will give you service – ”

Giles started violently. “Nay, lord,” he said hurriedly, “duty calls, and what are weary limbs and an empty belly beside duty? Let me go with you and do my devoir in Egypt!”

“Your spirit likes me well, Messer Giles,” said Amalric with an approving smile. “Would that all the foreigners who come adventuring in Outremer were like you.”

“An they were,” quietly murmured an immobile-faced Egyptian to his mate, “not all the wine-vats of Palestine would suffice. We will tell a tale to the vizier concerning this liar.”

But lies or not, in the grey dawn of a young spring day, the iron men of Outremer rode southward, with the great banner billowing over their helmeted heads, and their spear-points coldly glinting in the dim light.

There were not many; the strength of the Crusading kingdoms lay in the quality, not the quantity, of their defenders. Three hundred and seventy-five knights took the road to Egypt: nobles of Jerusalem, barons whose castles guarded the eastern marches, Knights of Saint John in their white surcoats, grim Templars, adventurers from beyond the sea, their skins yet ruddy from the cold sun of the north.

With them rode a swarm of Turcoples, Christianized Turks, wiry men on lean ponies. After the horsemen lumbered the wagons, attended by the rag-and-tag camp followers, the servants, ragamuffins and trulls that tag after any host. With shining, steel-sheathed, banner-crowned van, and rear trailing out into picturesque squalor, the army of Jerusalem moved across the land.

The dunes of the Jifar knew again the tramp of shod horses, the clink of mail. The iron men were riding again the old road of war, the road their fathers had ridden so oft before them.

Yet when at last the Nile broke the monotony of the level land, winding like a serpent feathered with green palms, they heard the strident clamor of cymbals and *nakirs*, and saw egret feathers moving among gay-striped pavilions that bore the colors of Islam. Shirkuh had reached the Nile before them, with seven thousand horsemen.

Mobility was always an advantage possessed by the Moslems. It took time to gather the cumbrous Frankish host, time to move it.

Riding like a man possessed, the Mountain Lion had reached Nour ed din, told his tale, and then, with scarcely a pause, had raced southward again with the troops he had held in readiness since the first Egyptian campaign. The thought of Amalric in Egypt had sufficed to stir Nour ed din to action. If the Crusaders made themselves masters of the Nile, it meant the eventual doom of Islam.

Shirkuh's was the dynamic vitality of the nomad. Across the desert by Wadi el Ghizlan he had driven his riders until even the tough Seljuks reeled in their saddles. Into the teeth of a roaring sandstorm he had plunged, fighting like a madman for each mile, each second of time. He had crossed the Nile at Atfih, and now his riders were regaining their breath, while Shirkuh watched the eastern skyline for the moving forest of lances that would mark the coming of Amalric.

The king of Jerusalem dared not attempt a crossing in the teeth of his enemies; Shirkuh was in the same case. Without pitching camp, the Franks moved northward along the river bank. The iron men rode slowly, scanning the sullen stream for a possible crossing.

The Moslems broke camp and took up the march, keeping pace with the Franks. The *fellaheen*, peeking from their mud huts, were amazed by the sight of two hosts moving slowly in the same direction without hostile demonstration, with the river between.

So they came at last into sight of the towers of El Kahira.

The Franks pitched their camp close to the shores of Birket el Habash, near the gardens of el Fustat, whose six-storied houses reared their flat roofs among oceans of palms and waving blossoms. Across the river Shirkuh encamped at Gizeh, in the shadow of the scornful colossus reared by cryptic monarchs forgotten before his ancestors were born.

Matters fell at a deadlock. Shirkuh, for all his impetuosity, had the patience of the Kurd, imponderable as the mountains which bred him. He was content to play a waiting game, with the broad river between him and the terrible swords of the Europeans.

Shawar waited on Amalric with pomp and parade and the clamor of *nakirs*, and he found the lion wary as he was indomitable. Two hundred thousand *dinars* and the caliph's hand on the bargain, that was the price he demanded for Egypt. And Shawar knew he must pay. Egypt slumbered as she had slumbered for a thousand years, inert alike under the heel of Macedonian, Roman, Arab, Turk or Fatimid. The *fellah* toiled in his field, and scarcely knew to whom he paid his taxes. There was no land of Egypt: it was a myth, a cloak for a despot. Shawar was Egypt; Egypt was Shawar; the price of Egypt was the price of Shawar's head.

So the Frankish ambassadors went to the hall of the caliph.

Mystery ever shrouded the person of the Incarnation of Divine Reason. The spiritual center of the Shiite creed moved in a maze of mystic inscrutability, his veil of supernatural awe increasing as his political power was usurped by plotting viziers. No Frank had ever seen the caliph of Egypt.

Hugh of Caesarea and Geoffrey Fulcher, Master of the Templars, were chosen for the mission, blunt war-dogs, grim as their own swords. A group of mailed horsemen accompanied them.

They rode through the flowering gardens of el Fustat, past the chapel of Sitta Nefisa where Dirgham had died under the hands of the mob; through winding streets which covered the ruins of el Askar and el Katai; past the Mosque of Ibn Tulun, and the Lake of the Elephant, into the teeming streets of El Mansuriya, the quarter of the Sudanese, where weird native citterns twanged in the houses, and swaggering black men, gaudy in silk and gold, stared childishly at the grim horsemen.

At the Gate Zuweyla the riders halted, and the Master of the Temple and the lord of Caesarea rode on, attended by only one man – Giles Hobson. The fat Englishman wore good leather and chain-mail, and a sword at his thigh, though the portly arch of his belly somewhat detracted from his war-like appearance. Little thought was being taken in those perilous times of royal bastards or younger sons; but Giles had won the approval of Hugh of Caesarea, who loved a good tale and a bawdy song.

At Zuweyla gate Shawar met them with pomp and pageantry and escorted them through the bazaars and the Turkish quarter where hawk-like men from beyond the Oxus stared and silently spat. For the first time, Franks in armor were riding through the streets of El Kahira.

At the gates of the Great East Palace the ambassadors gave up their swords, and followed the vizier through dim tapestry-hung corridors and gold arched doors where tongueless Sudanese stood like images of black silence, sword in hand. They crossed an open court bordered by fretted arcades supported by marble columns; their iron-clad feet rang on mosaic paving. Fountains jetted their silver sheen into the air, peacocks spread their iridescent plumage, parrots fluttered on gold threads. In broad halls jewels glittered for eyes of birds wrought of silver or gold. So they came at last to the vast audience room, with its ceiling of carved ebony and ivory. Courtiers in silks and jewels knelt facing a broad curtain heavy with gold and sewn with pearls that gleamed against its satin darkness like stars in a midnight sky.

Shawar prostrated himself thrice to the carpeted floor. The curtains were swept apart, and the wondering Franks gazed on the gold throne, where, in robes of white silk, sat al Adhid, Caliph of Egypt.

They saw a slender youth, dark almost to negroid, whose hands lay limp, whose eyes seemed already shadowed by ultimate sleep. A deadly weariness clung about him, and he listened to the representations of his vizier as one who heeds a tale too often told.

But a flash of awakening came to him when Shawar suggested, with extremest delicacy, that the Franks wished his hand upon the pact. A visible shudder passed through the room. Al Adhid hesitated, then extended his gloved hand. Sir Hugh’s voice boomed through the breathless hall.

“Lord, the good faith of princes is naked; troth is not clothed.”

All about came a hissing intake of breath. But the Caliph smiled, as at the whims of a barbarian, and stripping the glove from his hand, laid his slender fingers in the bear-like paw of the Crusader.

All this Giles Hobson observed from his discreet position in the background. All eyes were centered on the group clustered about the golden throne. From near his shoulder a soft hiss reached Giles' ear. Its feminine note brought him quickly about, forgetful of kings and caliphs. A heavy tapestry was drawn slightly aside, and in the sweet-smelling gloom, a slender white hand waved invitingly. Another scent made itself evident, a luring perfume, subtle yet unmistakable.

Giles turned silently and pulled aside the tapestry, straining his eyes in the semi-darkness. There was an alcove behind the hangings, and a narrow corridor meandering away. Before him stood a figure whose vagueness did not conceal its lissomeness. A pair of eyes glowed and sparkled at him, and his head swam with the power of that diabolical perfume.

He let the tapestry fall behind him. Through the hangings the voices in the throne room came vague and muffled.

The woman spoke not; her little feet made no sound on the thickly carpeted floor over which he stumbled. She invited, yet retreated; she beckoned, yet she withheld herself. Only when, baffled, he broke into earnest profanity, she admonished him with a finger to her lips and a warning: "Sssssh!"

"Devil take you, wench!" he swore, stopping short. "I'll follow you no more. What manner of game is this, anyway? If you don't want to deal with me, why did you wave at me? Why do you beckon and then run away? I'm going back to the audience hall and may the dogs bite your – "

"Wait!" The voice was liquid sweet.

She glided close to him, laying her hands on his shoulders. What light there was in the winding tapestried corridor was behind her, outlining her supple figure through her filmy garments. Her flesh shone like dim ivory in the purple gloom.

"I could love you," she whispered.

"Well, what detains you?" he demanded uneasily.

"Not here; follow me." She glided out of his groping arms and drifted ahead of him, a lithely swaying ghost among the velvet hangings.

He followed, burning with impatience and questing not at all for the reason of the whole affair, until she came out into an octagonal chamber,

almost as dimly lighted as had been the corridor. As he pushed after her, a hanging slid over the opening behind him. He gave it no heed. Where he was he neither knew nor cared. All that was important to him was the supple figure that posed shamelessly before him, veilless, naked arms uplifted and slender fingers intertwined behind her nape over which fell a mass of hair that was like black burnished foam.

He stood struck dumb with her beauty. She was like no other woman he had ever seen; the difference was not only in her dark eyes, her dusky tresses, her long *kohl*-tinted lashes, or the warm ivory of her roundly slender limbs. It was in every glance, each movement, each posture, that made voluptuousness an art. Here was a woman cultured in the arts of pleasure, a dream to madden any lover of the fleshpots of life. The English, French and Venetian women he had nuzzled seemed slow, stolid, frigid beside this vibrant image of sensuality. A favorite of the Caliph! The implication of the realization sent the blood pounding suffocatingly through his veins. He panted for breath.

"Am I not fair?" Her breath, scented with the perfume that sweetened her body, fanned his face. The soft tendrils of her hair brushed against his cheek. He groped for her, but she eluded him with disconcerting ease. "What will you do for me?"

"Anything!" he swore ardently, and with more sincerity than he usually voiced the vow.

His hand closed on her wrist and he dragged her to him; his other arm bent about her waist, and the feel of her resilient flesh made him drunk. He pawed for her lips with his, but she bent supplely backward, twisting her head this way and that, resisting him with unexpected strength; the lithe pantherish strength of a dancing-girl. Yet even while she resisted him, she did not repulse him.

"Nay," she laughed, and her laughter was the gurgle of a silver fountain; "first there is a price!"

"Name it, for the love of the Devil!" he gasped. "Am I a frozen saint? I can not resist you forever!" He had released her wrist and was pawing at her shoulder straps.

Suddenly she ceased to struggle; throwing both arms about his thick neck, she looked into his eyes. The depths of hers, dark and mysterious,

seemed to drown him; he shuddered as a wave of something akin to fear swept over him.

"You are high in the council of the Franks!" she breathed. "We know you disclosed to Shawar that you are a son of the English king. You came with Amalric's ambassadors. You know his plans. Tell what I wish to know, and I am yours! What is Amalric's next move?"

"He will build a bridge of boats and cross the Nile to attack Shirkuh by night," answered Giles without hesitation.

Instantly she laughed, with mockery and indescribable malice, struck him in the face, twisted free, sprang back, and cried out sharply. The next moment the shadows were alive with rushing figures as from the tapestries leaped naked black giants.

Giles wasted no time in futile gestures toward his empty belt. As great dusky hands fell on him, his massive fist smashed against bone, and the negro dropped with a fractured jaw. Springing over him, Giles scudded across the room with unexpected agility. But to his dismay he saw that the doorways were hidden by the tapestries. He groped frantically among the hangings; then a brawny arm hooked throttlingly about his throat from behind, and he felt himself dragged backward and off his feet. Other hands snatched at him, woolly heads bobbed about him, white eyeballs and teeth glimmered in the semi-darkness. He lashed out savagely with his foot and caught a big black in the belly, curling him up in agony on the floor. A thumb felt for his eye and he mangled it between his teeth, bringing a whimper of pain from the owner. But a dozen pairs of hands lifted him, smiting and kicking. He heard a grating, sliding noise, felt himself swung up violently and hurled downward – a black opening in the floor rushed up to meet him. An ear-splitting yell burst from him, and then he was rushing headlong down a walled shaft, up which sounded the sucking and bubbling of racing water.

He hit with a tremendous splash and felt himself swept irresistibly onward. The well was wide at the bottom. He had fallen near one side of it, and was being carried toward the other in which, he had light enough to see as he rose blowing and snorting above the surface, another black orifice gaped. Then he was thrown with stunning force against the edge of that opening, his legs and hips were sucked through, but his frantic fingers,

slipping from the mossy stone lip, encountered something and clung on. Looking wildly up, he saw, framed high above him in the dim light, a cluster of woolly heads rimming the mouth of the well. Then abruptly all light was shut out as the trap was replaced, and Giles was conscious only of utter blackness and the rustle and swirl of the racing water that dragged relentlessly at him.

This, Giles knew, was the well into which were thrown foes of the Caliph. He wondered how many ambitious generals, plotting viziers, rebellious nobles and importunate *harim* favorites had gone whirling through that black hole to come into the light of day again only floating as carrion on the bosom of the Nile. It was evident that the well had been sunk into an underground flow of water that rushed into the river, perhaps miles away.

Clinging there by his fingernails in the dank rushing blackness, Giles Hobson was so frozen with horror that it did not even occur to him to call on the various saints he ordinarily blasphemed. He merely hung on to the irregularly round, slippery object his hands had found, frantic with the fear of being torn away and whirled down that black slimy tunnel, feeling his arms and fingers growing numb with the strain, and slipping gradually but steadily from their hold.

His last ounce of breath went from him in a wild cry of despair, and – miracle of miracles – it was answered. Light flooded the shaft, a light dim and gray, yet in such contrast with the former blackness that it momentarily dazzled him. Someone was shouting, but the words were unintelligible amidst the rush of the black waters. He tried to shout back, but he could only gurgle. Then, mad with fear lest the trap should shut again, he achieved an inhuman screech that almost burst his throat.

Shaking the water from his eyes and craning his head backward, he saw a human head and shoulders blocked in the open trap far above him. A rope was dangling down toward him. It swayed before his eyes, but he dared not let go long enough to seize it. In desperation, he mouthed for it, gripped it with his teeth, then let go and snatched, even as he was sucked into the black hole. His numbed fingers slipped along the rope. Tears of fear and helplessness rolled down his face. But his jaws were locked desperately on the strands, and his corded neck muscles resisted the terrific strain.

Whoever was on the other end of the rope was hauling like a team of oxen. Giles felt himself ripped bodily from the clutch of the torrent. As his

feet swung clear, he saw, in the dim light, that to which he had been clinging: a human skull, wedged somehow in a crevice of the slimy rock.

He was drawn rapidly up, revolving like a pendant. His numbed hands clawed stiffly at the rope, his teeth seemed to be tearing from their sockets. His jaw muscles were knots of agony, his neck felt as if it were being racked.

Just as human endurance reached its limit, he saw the lip of the trap slip past him, and he was dumped on the floor at its brink.

He grovelled in agony, unable to unlock his jaws from about the hemp. Someone was massaging the cramped muscles with skilful fingers, and at last they relaxed with a stream of blood from the tortured gums. A goblet of wine was pressed to his lips and he gulped it loudly, the liquid slopping over and spilling on his slime-smeared mail. Someone was tugging at it, as if fearing lest he injure himself by guzzling, but he clung on with both hands until the beaker was empty. Then only he released it, and with a loud gasping sigh of relief, looked up into the face of Shawar. Behind the vizier were several giant Sudani, of the same type as those who had been responsible for Giles' predicament.

"We missed you from the audience hall," said Shawar. "Sir Hugh roared treachery, until a eunuch said he saw you follow a woman slave off down a corridor. Then the lord Hugh laughed and said you were up to your old tricks, and rode away with the lord Geoffrey. But I knew the peril you ran in dallying with a woman in the Caliph's palace; so I searched for you, and a slave told me he had heard a frightful yell in this chamber. I came, and entered just as a black was replacing the carpet above the trap. He sought to flee, and died without speaking." The vizier indicated a sprawling form that lay near, head lolling on half-severed neck. "How came you in this state?"

"A woman lured me here," answered Giles, "and set blackamoors upon me, threatening me with the well unless I revealed Amalric's plans."

"What did you tell her?" The vizier's eyes burned so intently on Giles that the fat man shuddered slightly and hitched himself further away from the yet open trap.

"I told them nothing! Who am I to know the king's plans, anyway? Then they dumped me into that cursed hole, though I fought like a lion and maimed a score of the rogues. Had I but had my trusty sword – "

At a nod from Shawar the trap was closed, the rug drawn over it. Giles breathed a sigh of relief. Slaves dragged the corpse away.

The vizier touched Giles' arm and led the way through a corridor concealed by the hangings.

"I will send an escort with you to the Frankish camp. There are spies of Shirkuh in this palace, and others who love him not, yet hate me. Describe me this woman – the eunuch saw only her hand."

Giles groped for adjectives, then shook his head.

"Her hair was black, her eyes moonfire, her body alabaster."

"A description that would fit a thousand women of the Caliph," said the vizier. "No matter; get you gone, for the night wanes and Allah only knows what morn will bring."

The night was indeed late as Giles Hobson rode into the Frankish camp surrounded by Turkish *mamluks* with drawn sabres. But a light burned in Amalric's pavilion, which the wary monarch preferred to the palace offered him by Shawar; and thither Giles went, confident of admittance as a teller of lusty tales who had won the king's friendship.

Amalric and his barons were bent above a map as the fat man entered, and they were too engrossed to notice his entry, or his bedraggled appearance.

"Shawar will furnish us men and boats," the king was saying; "they will fashion the bridge, and we will make the attempt by night – "

An explosive grunt escaped Giles' lips, as if he had been hit in the belly.

"What, Sir Giles the Fat!" exclaimed Amalric, looking up; "are you but now returned from your adventuring in Cairo? You are fortunate still to have head on your shoulders. Eh – what ails you, that you sweat and grow pale? Where are you going?"

"I have taken an emetic," mumbled Giles over his shoulder.

Beyond the light of the pavilion he broke into a stumbling run. A tethered horse started and snorted at him. He caught the rein, grasped the saddle peak; then, with one foot in the stirrup, he halted. Awhile he meditated; then at last, wiping cold sweat beads from his face, he returned with slow and dragging steps to the king's tent.

He entered unceremoniously and spoke forthwith: "Lord, is it your plan to throw a bridge of boats across the Nile?"

“Aye, so it is,” declared Amalric.

Giles uttered a loud groan and sank down on a bench, his head in his hands. “I am too young to die!” he lamented. “Yet I must speak, though my reward be a sword in the belly. This night Shirkuh’s spies trapped me into speaking like a fool. I told them the first lie that came into my head – and Saint Withold defend me, I spoke the truth unwittingly. I told them you meant to build a bridge of boats!”

A shocked silence reigned. Geoffrey Fulcher dashed down his cup in a spasm of anger. “Death to the fat fool!” he swore, rising.

“Nay!” Amalric smiled suddenly. He stroked his golden beard. “Our foe will be expecting the bridge, now. Good enough. Hark ye!”

And as he spoke, grim smiles grew on the lips of the barons, and Giles Hobson began to grin and thrust out his belly, as if his fault had been virtue, craftily devised.

All night the Saracen host had stood at arms; on the opposite bank fires blazed, reflected from the rounded walls and burnished roofs of el Fustat. Trumpets mingled with the clang of steel. The Emir Shirkuh, riding up and down the bank along which his mailed hawks were ranged, glanced toward the eastern sky, just tinged with dawn. A wind blew out of the desert.

There had been fighting along the river the day before, and all through the night drums had rumbled and trumpets blared their threat. All day Egyptians and naked Sudani had toiled to span the dusky flood with boats chained together, end to end. Thrice they had pushed toward the western bank, under the cover of their archers in the barges, only to falter and shrink back before the clouds of Turkish arrows. Once the end of the boat bridge had almost touched the shore, and the helmeted riders had spurred their horses into the water to slash at the shaven heads of the workers. Shirkuh had expected an onslaught of the knights across the frail span, but it had not come. The men in the boats had again fallen back, leaving their dead floating in the muddily churning wash.

Shirkuh decided that the Franks were lurking behind walls, saving themselves for a supreme effort, when their allies should have completed the bridge. The opposite bank was clustered with swarms of naked figures, and the Kurd expected to see them begin the futile task once more.

As dawn whitened the desert, there came a rider who rode like the wind, sword in hand, turban unbound, blood dripping from his beard.

“Woe to Islam!” he cried. “The Franks have crossed the river!”

Panic swept the Moslem camp; men jerked their steeds from the river bank, staring wildly northward. Only Shirkuh’s bull-like voice kept them from flinging away their swords and bolting.

The Emir’s profanity was frightful. He had been fooled and tricked. While the Egyptians held his attention with their useless labor, Amalric and the iron men had marched northward, crossed the prongs of the Delta in ships, and were now hastening vengefully southward. The Emir’s spies had had neither time nor opportunity to reach him. Shawar had seen to that.

The Mountain Lion dared not await attack in this unsheltered spot. Before the sun was well up, the Turkish host was on the march; behind them the rising light shone on spear-points that gleamed in a rising cloud of dust.

This dust irked Giles Hobson, riding behind Amalric and his councillors. The fat Englishman was thirsty; dust settled greyly on his mail; gnats bit him, sweat got into his eyes, and the sun, as it rose, beat mercilessly on his basinet; so he hung it on his saddle peak and pushed back his linked coif, daring sun-stroke. On either side of him leather creaked and worn mail

clinked. Giles thought of the ale-pots of England, and cursed the man whose hate had driven him around the world.

And so they hunted the Mountain Lion up the valley of the Nile, until they came to el Baban, The Gates, and found the Saracen host drawn up for battle in the gut of the low sandy hills.

Word came back along the ranks, putting new fervor into the knights. The clatter of leather and steel seemed imbued with new meaning. Giles put on his helmet and rising in his stirrups, looked over the iron-clad shoulders in front of him.

To the left were the irrigated fields on the edge of which the host was riding. To the right was the desert. Ahead of them the terrain was broken by the hills. On these hills and in the shallow valleys between bristled the banners of the Turks, and their *nakirs* blared. A mass of the host was drawn up in the plain between the Franks and the hills.

The Christians had halted: three hundred and seventy-five knights, plus half a dozen more who had ridden all the way from Acre and reached the host only an hour before, with their retainers. Behind them, moving with the baggage, their allies halted in straggling lines: a thousand Turcoples, and some five thousand Egyptians, whose gaudy garments outshone their courage.

“Let us ride forward and smite those on the plain,” urged one of the foreign knights, newly come to the East.

Amalric scanned the closely massed ranks and shook his head. He glanced at the banners that floated among the spears on the slopes on either flank where the kettle-drums clamored.

“That is the banner of Saladin in the center,” he said. “Shirkuh’s house troops are on yonder hill. If the center expected to stand, the Emir would be there. No, messers, I think it is their wish to lure us into a charge. We will wait their attack, under cover of the Turcoples’ bows. Let them come to us; they are in a hostile land, and must push the war.”

The rank and file had not heard his words. He lifted his hand, and thinking it preceded an order to charge, the forest of lances quivered and sank in rest. Amalric, realizing the mistake, rose in his stirrups to shout his command to fall back, but before he could speak, Giles’ horse, restive, shouldered that of the knight next to him. This knight, one of those who had

joined the host less than an hour before, turned irritably; Giles looked into a lean beaked face, seamed by a livid scar.

“Ha!” Instinctively the ogre caught at his sword.

Giles’ action was also instinctive. Everything else was swept out of his mind at the sight of that dread visage which had haunted his dreams for more than a year. With a yelp he sank his spurs into his horse’s belly. The beast neighed shrilly and leaped, blundering against Amalric’s war-horse. That high-strung beast reared and plunged, got the bit between its teeth, broke from the ranks and thundered out across the plain.

Bewildered, seeing their king apparently charging the Saracen host single-handed, the men of the Cross gave tongue and followed him. The plain shook as the great horses stampeded across it, and the spears of the iron-clad riders crashed splinteringly against the shields of their enemies.

The movement was so sudden it almost swept the Moslems off their feet. They had not expected a charge so instantly to follow the coming up of the Christians. But the allies of the knights were struck by confusion. No orders had been given, no arrangement made for battle. The whole host was disordered by that premature onslaught. The Turcoples and Egyptians wavered uncertainly, drawing up about the baggage wagons.

The whole first rank of the Saracen center went down, and over their mangled bodies rode the knights of Jerusalem, swinging their great swords. An instant the Turkish ranks held; then they began to fall back in good order, marshalled by their commander, a slender, dark, self-contained young officer, Salah ed din, Shirkuh’s nephew.

The Christians followed. Amalric, cursing his mischance, made the best of a bad bargain, and so well he plied his trade that the harried Turks cried out on Allah and turned their horses’ heads from him.

Back into the gut of the hills the Saracens retired, and turning there, under cover of slope and cliff, darkened the air with their shafts. The headlong force of the knights’ charge was broken in the uneven ground, but the iron men came on grimly, bending their helmeted heads to the rain.

Then on the flanks, kettle-drums roared into fresh clamor. The riders of the right wing, led by Shirkuh, swept down the slopes and struck the horde which clustered loosely about the baggage train. That charge swept the unwarlike Egyptians off the field in headlong flight. The left wing began to

close in to take the knights on the flank, driving before it the troops of the Turcoples. Amalric, hearing the kettle-drums behind and on either side of him as well as in front, gave the order to fall back, before they were completely hemmed in.

To Giles Hobson it seemed the end of the world. He was deafened by the clang of swords and the shouts. He seemed surrounded by an ocean of surging steel and billowing dust clouds. He parried blindly and smote blindly, hardly knowing whether his blade cut flesh or empty air. Out of the defiles horsemen were moving, chanting exultantly. A cry of "*Yala-l-Islam!*" rose above the thunder – Saladin's war-cry, that was in later years to ring around the world. The Saracen center was coming into the battle again.

Abruptly the press slackened, broke; the plain was filled with flying figures. A strident ululation cut the din. The Turcoples' shafts had stayed the Saracens' left wing just long enough to allow the knights to retreat through the closing jaws of the vise. But Amalric, retreating slowly, was cut off with a handful of knights. The Turks swirled about him, screaming in exultation, slashing and smiting with mad abandon. In the dust and confusion the ranks of the iron men fell back, unaware of the fate of their king.

Giles Hobson, riding through the field like a man in a daze, came face to face with Guiscard de Chastillon.

"Dog!" croaked the knight. "We are doomed, but I'll send you to hell ahead of me!"

His sword went up, but Giles leaned from his saddle and caught his arm. The fat man's eyes were bloodshot; he licked his dust-stained lips. There was blood on his sword, and his helmet was dinted.

"Your selfish hate and my cowardice has cost Amalric the field this day," Giles croaked. "There he fights for his life; let us redeem ourselves as best we may."

Some of the glare faded from de Chastillon's eyes; he twisted about, stared at the plumed heads that surged and eddied about a cluster of iron helmets; and he nodded his steel-clad head.

They rode together into the melee. Their swords hissed and crackled on mail and bone. Amalric was down, pinned under his dying horse. Around

him whirled the eddy of battle, where his knights were dying under a sea of hacking blades.

Giles fell rather than jumped from his saddle, gripped the dazed king and dragged him clear. The fat Englishman's muscles cracked under the strain, a groan escaped his lips. A Seljuk leaned from the saddle, slashed at Amalric's unhelmeted head. Giles bent his head, took the blow on his own crown; his knees sagged and sparks flashed before his eyes. Guiscard de Chastillon rose in his stirrups, swinging his sword with both hands. The blade crunched through mail, gritted through bone. The Seljuk dropped, shorn through the spine. Giles braced his legs, heaved the king up, slung him over his saddle.

"Save the king!" Giles did not recognize that croak as his own voice.

Geoffrey Fulcher loomed through the crush, dealing great strokes. He seized the rein of Giles' steed; half a dozen reeling, blood-dripping knights closed about the frantic horse and its stunned burden. Nerved to desperation they hacked their way clear. The Seljuks swirled in behind them to be met by Guiscard de Chastillon's flailing blade.

The waves of wild horsemen and flying blades broke on him. Saddles were emptied and blood spurted. Giles rose from the red-splashed ground among the lashing hoofs. He ran in among the horses, stabbing at bellies and thighs. A sword stroke knocked off his helmet. His blade snapped under a Seljuk's ribs.

Guiscard's horse screamed awfully and sank to the earth. His grim rider rose, spurting blood at every joint of his armor. Feet braced wide on the blood-soaked earth, he wielded his great sword until the steel wave washed over him and he was hidden from view by waving plumes and rearing steeds.

Giles ran at a heron-feathered chief, gripped his leg with his naked hands. Blows rained on his coif, bringing fire-shot darkness, but he hung grimly on. He wrenched the Turk from his saddle, fell with him, groping for his throat. Hoofs pounded about him, a steed shouldered against him, knocking him rolling in the dust. He clambered painfully to his feet, shaking the blood and sweat from his eyes. Dead men and dead horses lay heaped in a ghastly pile about him.

A familiar voice reached his dulled ears. He saw Shirkuh sitting his white horse, gazing down at him. The Mountain Lion’s beard bristled in a grin.

“You have saved Amalric,” said he, indicating a group of riders in the distance, closing in with the retreating host; the Saracens were not pressing the pursuit too closely. The iron men were falling back in good order. They were defeated, not broken. The Turks were content to allow them to retire unmolested.

“You are a hero, Giles ibn Malik,” said Shirkuh.

Giles sank down on a dead horse and dropped his head in his hands. The marrow of his legs seemed turned to water, and he was shaken with a desire to weep.

“I am neither a hero nor the son of a king,” said Giles. “Slay me and be done with it.”

“Who spoke of slaying?” demanded Shirkuh. “I have just won an empire in this battle, and I would quaff a goblet in token of it. Slay you? By Allah, I would not harm a hair of such a stout fighter and noble toper. You shall come and drink with me in celebration of a kingdom won when I ride into El Kahira in triumph.”

Hawks of Outremer

The still, white, creeping road slips on,
Marked by the bones of man and beast.
What comeliness and might have gone
To pad the highway of the East!
Long dynasties of fallen rose,
The glories of a thousand wars,
A million lovers' hearts compose
The dust upon the road to Fars.

– Vansittart

I
A Man Returns

“Halt!” The bearded man-at-arms swung his pike about, growling like a surly mastiff. It paid to be wary on the road to Antioch. The stars blinked redly through the thick night and their light was not sufficient for the fellow to make out what sort of man it was who loomed so gigantically before him.

An iron-clad hand shot out suddenly and closed on the soldier’s mailed shoulder in a grasp that numbed his whole arm. From beneath the helmet the guardsman saw the blaze of ferocious blue eyes that seemed lambent, even in the dark.

“Saints preserve us!” gasped the frightened man-at-arms. “Cormac FitzGeoffrey! Avaunt! Back to Hell with ye, like a good knight! I swear to you, sir – ”

“Swear me no oaths,” growled the knight. “What is this talk?”

“Are you not an incorporeal spirit?” mouthed the soldier. “Were you not slain by the Moorish corsairs on your homeward voyage?”

“By the accursed gods!” snarled FitzGeoffrey. “Does this hand feel like smoke?”

He sank his mailed fingers into the soldier’s arm and grinned bleakly at the resultant howl.

“Enough of such mummery; tell me who is within that tavern.”

“Only my master, Sir Rupert de Vaile, of Rouen.”

“Good enough,” grunted the other. “He is one of the few men I count friends, in the East or elsewhere.”

The big warrior strode to the tavern door and entered, treading lightly as a cat despite his heavy armor. The man-at-arms rubbed his arm and stared after him curiously, noting, in the dim light, that FitzGeoffrey bore a shield with the horrific emblem of his family – a white grinning skull. The guardsman knew him of old – a turbulent character, a savage fighter and the only man among the Crusaders who had been esteemed stronger than Richard the Lion-hearted. But FitzGeoffrey had taken ship for his native isle even before Richard had departed from the Holy Land. The Third Crusade had ended in failure and disgrace; most of the Frankish knights had

followed their kings homeward. What was this grim Irish killer doing on the road to Antioch?

Sir Rupert de Vaile, once of Rouen, now a lord of the fast-fading Outremer, turned as the great form bulked in the doorway. Cormac FitzGeoffrey was a fraction of an inch above six feet, but with his mighty shoulders and two hundred pounds of iron muscle, he seemed shorter. The Norman stared in surprized recognition, and sprang to his feet. His fine face shone with sincere pleasure.

"Cormac, by the saints! Why, man, we heard that you were dead!"

Cormac returned the hearty grip, while his thin lips curved slightly in what would have been, in another man, a broad grin of greeting. Sir Rupert was a tall man, and well knit, but he seemed almost slight beside the huge Irish warrior who combined bulk with a sort of dynamic aggressiveness that was apparent in his every movement.

FitzGeoffrey was clean-shaven and the various scars that showed on his dark, grim face lent his already formidable features a truly sinister aspect. When he took off his plain vizorless helmet and thrust back his mail coif, his square-cut, black hair that topped his low broad forehead contrasted strongly with his cold blue eyes. A true son of the most indomitable and savage race that ever trod the blood-stained fields of battle, Cormac FitzGeoffrey looked to be what he was – a ruthless fighter, born to the game of war, to whom the ways of violence and bloodshed were as natural as the ways of peace are to the average man.

Son of a woman of the O'Briens and a renegade Norman knight, Geoffrey the Bastard, in whose veins, it is said, coursed the blood of William the Conqueror, Cormac had seldom known an hour of peace or ease in all his thirty years of violent life. He was born in a feud-torn and blood-drenched land, and raised in a heritage of hate and savagery. The ancient culture of Erin had long crumbled before the repeated onslaughts of Norsemen and Danes. Harried on all sides by cruel foes, the rising civilization of the Celts had faded before the fierce necessity of incessant conflict, and the merciless struggle for survival had made the Gaels as savage as the heathens who assailed them.

Now, in Cormac's time, war upon red war swept the crimson isle, where clan fought clan, and the Norman adventurers tore at one another's throats, or resisted the attacks of the Irish, playing tribe against tribe, while from

Norway and the Orkneys the still half-pagan Vikings ravaged all impartially.

A vague realization of all this flashed through Sir Rupert's mind as he stood staring at his friend.

"We heard you were slain in a sea-fight off Sicily," he repeated.

Cormac shrugged his shoulders. "Many died then, it is true, and I was struck senseless by a stone from a ballista. Doubtless that is how the rumor started. But you see me, as much alive as ever."

"Sit down, old friend." Sir Rupert thrust forward one of the rude benches which formed part of the tavern's furniture. "What is forward in the West?"

Cormac took the wine goblet proffered him by a dark-skinned servitor, and drank deeply.

"Little of note," said he. "In France the king counts his pence and squabbles with his nobles. Richard – if he lives – languishes somewhere in Germany, 'tis thought. In England Shane – that is to say, John – oppresses the people and betrays the barons. And in Ireland – Hell!" He laughed shortly and without mirth. "What shall I say of Ireland but the same old tale? Gael and foreigner cut each other's throat and plot together against the king. John De Coursey, since Hugh de Lacy supplanted him as governor, has raged like a madman, burning and pillaging, while Donal O'Brien lurks in the west to destroy what remains. Yet, by Satan, I think this land is but little better."

"Yet there is peace of a sort now," murmured Sir Rupert.

"Aye – peace while the jackal Saladin gathers his powers," grunted Cormac. "Think you he will rest idle while Acre, Antioch and Tripoli remain in Christian hands? He but waits an excuse to seize the remnants of Outremer."

Sir Rupert shook his head, his eyes shadowed.

"It is a naked land and a bloody one. Were it not akin to blasphemy I could curse the day I followed my king eastward. Betimes I dream of the orchards of Normandy, the deep cool forests and the dreaming vineyards. Methinks my happiest hours were when a page of twelve years – "

"At twelve," grunted FitzGeoffrey, "I was running wild with shock-head kerns on the naked fens – I wore wolfskins, weighed near fourteen stone and had killed three men."

Sir Rupert looked curiously at his friend. Separated from Cormac's native land by a width of sea and the breadth of Britain, the Norman knew but little of the affairs in that far isle. But he knew vaguely that Cormac's life had not been an easy one. Hated by the Irish and despised by the Normans, he had paid back contempt and ill-treatment with savage hate and ruthless vengeance. It was known that he owned a shadow of allegiance only to the great house of Fitzgerald, who, as much Welsh as Norman, had even then begun to take up Irish customs and Irish quarrels.

"You wear another sword than that you wore when I saw you last."

"They break in my hands," said Cormac. "Three Turkish sabers went into the forging of the sword I wielded at Joppa – yet it shattered like glass in that sea-fight off Sicily. I took this from the body of a Norse sea-king who led a raid into Munster. It was forged in Norway – see the pagan runes on the steel?"

He drew the sword and the great blade shimmered bluely, like a thing alive in the candle light. The servants crossed themselves and Sir Rupert shook his head.

"You should not have drawn it here – they say blood follows such a sword."

"Bloodshed follows my trail anyway," growled Cormac. "This blade has already drunk FitzGeoffrey blood – with this that Norse sea-king slew my brother, Shane."

"And you wear such a sword?" exclaimed Sir Rupert in horror. "No good will come of that evil blade, Cormac!"

"Why not?" asked the big warrior impatiently. "It's a good blade – I wiped out the stain of my brother's blood when I slew his slayer. By Satan, but that sea-king was a grand sight in his coat of mail with silvered scales. His silvered helmet was strong too – ax, helmet and skull shattered together."

"You had another brother, did you not?"

"Aye – Donal. Eochaidh O'Donnell ate his heart out after the battle at Coolmanagh. There was a feud between us at the time, so it may be Eochaidh merely saved me the trouble – but for all that I burned the O'Donnell in his own castle."

"How came you to first ride on the Crusade?" asked Sir Rupert curiously. "Were you stirred with a desire to cleanse your soul by smiting the Paynim?"

“Ireland was too hot for me,” answered the Norman-Gael candidly. “Lord Shamus MacGearailt – James Fitzgerald – wished to make peace with the English king and I feared he would buy favor by delivering me into the hands of the king’s governor. As there was feud between my family and most of the Irish clans, there was nowhere for me to go. I was about to seek my fortune in Scotland when young Eamonn Fitzgerald was stung by the hornet of Crusade and I accompanied him.”

“But you gained favor with Richard – tell me the tale.”

“Soon told. It was on the plains of Azotus when we came to grips with the Turks. Aye, you were there! I was fighting alone in the thick of the fray and helmets and turbans were cracking like eggs all around when I noted a strong knight in the forefront of our battle. He cut deeper and deeper into the close-ranked lines of the heathen and his heavy mace scattered brains like water. But so dented was his shield and so stained with blood his armor, I could not tell who he might be.

“But suddenly his horse went down and in an instant he was hemmed in on all sides by the howling fiends who bore him down by sheer weight of numbers. So hacking a way to his side I dismounted – ”

“Dismounted?” exclaimed Sir Rupert in amazement.

Cormac’s head jerked up in irritation at the interruption. “Why not?” he snapped. “I am no French she-knight to fear wading in the muck – anyway, I fight better on foot. Well, I cleared a space with a sweep or so of my sword, and the fallen knight, the press being lightened, came up roaring like a bull and swinging his blood-clotted mace with such fury he nearly brained *me* as well as the Turks. A charge of English knights swept the heathen away and when he lifted his vizor I saw I had succored Richard of England.

“ ‘Who are you and who is your master?’ said he.

“ ‘I am Cormac FitzGeoffrey and I have no master,’ said I. ‘I followed young Eamonn Fitzgerald to the Holy Land and since he fell before the walls of Acre, I seek my fortune alone.’

“ ‘What think ye of me as a master?’ asked he, while the battle raged half a bow-shot about us.

“ ‘You fight reasonably well for a man with Saxon blood in his veins,’ I answered, ‘but I own allegiance to no English king.’

“He swore like a trooper. ‘By the bones of the saints,’ said he, ‘that had cost another man his head. You saved my life, but for this insolence, no prince shall knight you!’

“ ‘Keep your knighthoods and be damned,’ said I. ‘I am a chief in Ireland – but we waste words; yonder are pagan heads to be smashed.’

“Later he bade me to his royal presence and waxed merry with me; a rare drinker he is, though a fool withal. But I distrust kings – I attached myself to the train of a brave and gallant young knight of France – the Sieur Gerard de Gissclin, full of insane ideals of chivalry, but a noble youth.

“When peace was made between the hosts, I heard hints of a renewal of strife between the Fitzgeralds and the Le Boteliers, and Lord Shamus having been slain by Nial Mac Art, and I being in favor with the king anyway, I took leave of Sieur Gerard and betook myself back to Erin. Well – we swept Ormond with torch and sword and hanged old Sir William le Botelier to his own barbican. Then, the Geraldines having no particular need of my sword at the moment, I bethought myself once more of Sieur Gerard, to whom I owed my life and which debt I have not yet had opportunity to pay. How, Sir Rupert, dwells he still in his castle of Ali-El-Yar?”

Sir Rupert’s face went suddenly white, and he leaned back as if shrinking from something. Cormac’s head jerked up and his dark face grew more forbidding and fraught with somber potentialities. He seized the Norman’s arm in an unconsciously savage grip.

“Speak, man,” he rasped. “What ails you?”

“Sieur Gerard,” half whispered Sir Rupert. “Had you not heard? Ali-El-Yar lies in smoldering ruins and Gerard is dead.”

Cormac snarled like a mad dog, his terrible eyes blazing with a fearful light. He shook Sir Rupert in the intensity of his passion.

“Who did the deed? He shall die, were he Emperor of Byzantium!”

“I know not!” Sir Rupert gasped, his mind half stunned by the blast of the Gael’s primitive fury. “There be foul rumors – Sieur Gerard loved a girl in a sheik’s harem, it is said. A horde of wild riders from the desert assailed his castle and a rider broke through to ask aid of the baron Conrad von Gonler. But Conrad refused – ”

“Aye!” snarled Cormac, with a savage gesture. “He hated Gerard because long ago the youngster had the best of him at sword-play on shipboard before old Frederick Barbarossa’s eyes. And what then?”

“Ali-El-Yar fell with all its people. Their stripped and mutilated bodies lay among the coals, but no sign was found of Gerard. Whether he died

before or after the attack on the castle is not known, but dead he must be, since no demand for ransom has been made."

"Thus Saladin keeps the peace!"

Sir Rupert, who knew Cormac's unreasoning hatred for the great Kurdish sultan, shook his head. "This was no work of his – there is incessant bickering along the border – Christian as much at fault as Moslem. It could not be otherwise with Frankish barons holding castles in the very heart of Muhammadan country. There are many private feuds and there are wild desert and mountain tribes who own no lordship even to Saladin, and wage their own wars. Many suppose that the sheik Nureddin El Ghor destroyed Ali-El-Yar and put Sieur Gerard to death."

Cormac caught up his helmet.

"Wait!" exclaimed Sir Rupert, rising. "What would you do?"

Cormac laughed savagely. "What would I do? I have eaten the bread of the de Gissclins. Am I a jackal to sneak home and leave my patron to the kites? Out on it!"

"But wait," Sir Rupert urged. "What will your life be worth if you ride on Nureddin's trail alone? I will return to Antioch and gather my retainers; we will avenge your friend together."

"Nureddin is a half-independent chief and I am a masterless wanderer," rumbled the Norman-Gael, "but you are Seneschal of Antioch. If you ride over the border with your men-at-arms, the swine Saladin will take advantage to break the truce and sweep the remnants of the Christian kingdoms into the sea. They are but weak shells, as it is, shadows of the glories of Baldwin and Bohemund. No – the FitzGeoffreys wreak their own vengeance. I ride alone."

He jammed his helmet into place and with a gruff "Farewell!" he turned and strode into the night, roaring for his horse. A trembling servant brought the great black stallion, which reared and snorted with a flash of wicked teeth. Cormac seized the reins and savagely jerked down the rearing steed, swinging into the saddle before the pawing front hoofs touched earth.

"Hate and the glutting of vengeance!" he yelled savagely, as the great stallion whirled away, and Sir Rupert, staring bewilderedly after him, heard the swiftly receding clash of the brazen-shod hoofs. Cormac FitzGeoffrey was riding east.

II
The Cast of An Ax

White dawn surged out of the Orient to break in rose-red billows on the hills of Outremer. The rich tints softened the rugged outlines, deepened the blue wastes of the sleeping desert.

The castle of the baron Conrad von Gonler frowned out over a wild and savage waste. Once a stronghold of the Seljuk Turks, its metamorphosis into the manor of a Frankish lord had abated none of the Eastern menace of its appearance. The walls had been strengthened and a barbican built in place of the usual wide gates. Otherwise the keep had not been altered.

Now in the dawn a grim, dark figure rode up to the deep, waterless moat which encircled the stronghold, and smote with iron-clad fist on hollow-ringing shield until the echoes reverberated among the hills. A sleepy man-at-arms thrust his head and his pike over the wall above the barbican and bellowed a challenge.

The lone rider threw back his helmeted head, disclosing a face dark with a passion that an all-night's ride had not cooled in the least.

"You keep rare watch here," roared Cormac FitzGeoffrey. "Is it because you're so hand-in-glove with the Paynim that you fear no attack? Where is that ale-guzzling swine you call your liege?"

"The baron is at wine," the fellow answered sullenly, in broken English.

"So early?" marveled Cormac.

"Nay," the other gave a surly grin, "he has feasted all night."

"Wine-bibber! Glutton!" raged Cormac. "Tell him I have business with him."

"And what shall I say your business is, Lord FitzGeoffrey?" asked the carl, impressed.

"Tell him I bring a passport to Hell!" yelled Cormac, gnashing his teeth, and the scared soldier vanished like a puppet on a string.

The Norman-Gael sat his horse impatiently, shield slung on his shoulders, lance in its stirrup socket, and to his surprize, suddenly the barbican door swung wide and out of it strutted a fantastic figure. Baron Conrad von Gonler was short and fat; broad of shoulder and portly of belly, though still a young man. His long arms and wide shoulders had gained him

a reputation as a deadly broadsword man, but just now he looked little of the fighter. Germany and Austria sent many noble knights to the Holy Land. Baron von Gonler was not one of them.

His only arm was a gold-chased dagger in a richly brocaded sheath. He wore no armor, and his costume, flaming with gay silk and heavy with gold, was a bizarre mingling of European gauds and Oriental finery. In one hand, on each finger of which sparkled a great jewel, he held a golden wine goblet. A band of drunken revellers reeled out behind him – minnesingers, dwarfs, dancing girls, wine-companions, vacuous-faced, blinking like owls in the daylight. All the boot-kissers and hangers-on that swarm after a rich and degenerate lord trooped with their master – scum of both races. The luxury of the East had worked quick ruin on Baron von Gonler.

"Well," shouted the baron, "who is it wishes to interrupt my drinking?"

"Any but a drunkard would know Cormac FitzGeoffrey," snarled the horseman, his lip writhing back from his strong teeth in contempt. "We have an account to settle."

That name and Cormac's tone had been enough to sober any drunken knight of the Outremer. But von Gonler was not only drunk; he was a degenerate fool. The baron took a long drink while his drunken crew stared curiously at the savage figure on the other side of the dry moat, whispering to one another.

"Once you were a man, von Gonler," said Cormac, in a tone of concentrated venom; "now you have become a groveling debauchee. Well, that's your own affair. The matter I have in mind is another – why did you refuse aid to the Sieur de Gissclin?"

The German's puffy, arrogant face took on new hauteur. He pursed his thick lips haughtily, while his bleared eyes blinked over his bulbous nose like an owl. He was an image of pompous stupidity that made Cormac grind his teeth.

"What was the Frenchman to me?" the baron retorted brutally. "It was his own fault – out of a thousand girls he might have taken, the young fool tried to steal one a sheik wanted himself. He, the purity of honor! Bah!"

He added a coarse jest and the creatures with him screamed with mirth, leaping and flinging themselves into obscene postures. Cormac's sudden and lion-like roar of fury gave them pause.

"Conrad von Gonler!" thundered the maddened Gael, "I name you liar, traitor and coward – dastard, poltroon and villain! Arm yourself and ride

out here on the plain. And haste – I can not waste much time on you – I must kill you quick and ride on lest another vermin escape me."

The baron laughed cynically. "Why should I fight you? You are not even a knight. You wear no knightly emblem on your shield."

"Evasions of a coward," raged FitzGeoffrey. "I am a chief in Ireland and I have cleft the skulls of men whose boots you are not worthy to touch. Will you arm yourself and ride out, or are you become the swinish coward I deem you?"

Von Gonler laughed in scornful anger.

"I need not risk my hide fighting you. I will not fight you, but I will have my men-at-arms fill your hide with crossbow bolts if you tarry longer."

"Von Gonler," Cormac's voice was deep and terrible in its brooding menace, "will you fight, or die in cold blood?"

The German burst into a sudden brainless shout of laughter.

"Listen to him!" he roared. "He threatens me – he on the other side of the moat, with the drawbridge lifted – I here in the midst of my henchmen!"

He smote his fat thigh and roared with his fool's laughter, while the debased men and women who served his pleasures laughed with him and insulted the grim Irish warrior with shrill anathema and indecent gestures. And suddenly Cormac, with a bitter curse, rose in his stirrups, snatched his battle-ax from his saddle-bow and hurled it with all his mighty strength.

The men-at-arms on the towers cried out and the dancing girls screamed. Von Gonler had thought himself to be out of reach – but there is no such thing as being out of reach of Norman-Irish vengeance. The heavy ax hissed as it clove the air and dashed out Baron Conrad's brains.

The fat, gross body buckled to the earth like a mass of melted tallow, one fat, white hand still gripping the empty wine goblet. The gay silks and cloth-of-gold were dabbled in a deeper red than ever was sold in the bazaar, and the jesters and dancers scattered like birds, screaming at the sight of that blasted head and the crimson ruin that had been a human face.

Cormac FitzGeoffrey made a fierce, triumphant gesture and voiced a deep-chested yell of such ferocious exultation that men blenched to hear. Then wheeling his black steed suddenly, he raced away before the dazed soldiers could get their wits together to send a shower of arrows after him.

He did not gallop far. The great steed was weary from a hard night's travel. Cormac soon swung in behind a jutting crag, and reining his horse up a steep incline, halted and looked back the way he had come. He was out of sight of the keep, but he heard no sounds of pursuit. A wait of some half-hour convinced him that no attempt had been made to follow him. It was dangerous and foolhardy to ride out of a safe castle into these hills. Cormac might well have been one of an ambushing force.

At any rate, whatever his enemies' thoughts were on the subject, it was evident that he need expect no present attempt at retaliation, and he grunted with angry satisfaction. He never shunned a fight, but just now he had other business on hand.

Cormac rode eastward.

III
The Road to El Ghor

The way to El Ghor was rough indeed. Cormac wound his way between huge jagged boulders, across deep ravines and up treacherous steeps. The sun slowly climbed toward the zenith and the heat waves began to dance and shimmer. The sun beat fiercely on Cormac's helmed head, and glancing back from the bare rocks, dazzled his narrowed eyes. But the big warrior gave no heed; in his own land he learned to defy sleet and snow and bitter cold; following the standard of Coeur de Lion, before the shimmering walls of Acre, on the dusty plains of Azotus, and before Joppa, he had become inured to the blaze of the Oriental sun, to the glare of naked sands, to the slashing dust winds.

At noon he halted long enough to allow the black stallion an hour's rest in the shade of a giant boulder. A tiny spring bubbled there, known to him of old, and it slaked the thirst of the man and the horse. The stallion cropped eagerly at the scrawny fringe of grass about the spring and Cormac ate of the dried meats he carried in a small pouch. Here he had watered his steed in the old days, when he rode with Gerard. Ali-El-Yar lay to the west; in the night he had swung around it in a wide circle as he rode to the castle of von Gonler. He had had no wish to gaze on the moldering ruins. The nearest Moslem chief of any importance was Nureddin El Ghor, who with his brother-at-arms, Kosru Malik, the Seljuk, held the castle of El Ghor, in the hills to the east.

Cormac rode on stolidly through the savage heat. As midafternoon neared he rode up out of a deep, wide defile and came onto the higher levels of the hills. Up this defile he had ridden aforetime to raid the wild tribes to the east, and on the small plateau at the head of the defile stood a gibbet where Sieur Gerard de Gissclin had once hanged a red-handed Turkoman chief as a warning to those tribes.

Now, as FitzGeoffrey rode up on the plateau, he saw the old tree again bore fruit. His keen eyes made out a human form suspended in midair, apparently by the wrists. A tall warrior in the peaked helmet and light mail shirt of a Moslem stood beneath, tentatively prodding at the victim with a spear, making the body sway and spin on the rope. A bay Turkoman horse

stood near. Cormac's cold eyes narrowed. The man on the rope – his naked body glistened too white in the sun for a Turk. The Norman-Gael touched spurs to the black stallion and swept across the plateau at a headlong run.

At the sudden thunder of hoofs the Muhammadan started and whirled. Dropping the spear with which he had been tormenting the captive, he mounted swiftly, stringing a short heavy bow as he did so. This done, and his left forearm thrust through the straps of a small round buckler, he trotted out to meet the onset of the Frank.

Cormac was approaching at a thundering charge, eyes glaring over the edge of his grim shield. He knew that this Turk would never meet him as a Frankish knight would have met him – breast to breast. The Moslem would avoid his ponderous rushes, and circling him on his nimbler steed, drive in shaft after shaft until one found its mark. But he rushed on as recklessly as if he had never before encountered Saracen tactics.

Now the Turk bent his bow and the arrow glanced from Cormac's shield. They were barely within javelin cast of each other, but even as the Moslem laid another shaft to string, doom smote him. Cormac, without checking his headlong gait, suddenly rose in his stirrups and gripping his long lance in the middle, cast it like a javelin. The unexpectedness of the move caught the Seljuk off guard and he made the mistake of throwing up his shield instead of dodging. The lance-head tore through the light buckler and crashed full on his mail-clad breast. The point bent on his hauberk without piercing the links, but the terrific impact dashed the Turk from his saddle and as he rose, dazed and groping for his scimitar, the great black stallion was already looming horrific over him, and under those frenzied hoofs he went down, torn and shattered.

Without a second glance at his victim Cormac rode under the gibbet and rising in the saddle, stared into the face of he who swung therefrom.

"By Satan," muttered the big warrior, " 'tis Micaul na Blaos – Michael de Blois, one of Gerard's squires. What devil's work is this?"

Drawing his sword he cut the rope and the youth slid into his arms. Young Michael's lips were parched and swollen, his eyes dull with suffering. He was naked except for short leathern breeks, and the sun had dealt cruelly with his fair skin. Blood from a slight scalp wound caked his yellow hair, and there were shallow cuts on his limbs – marks left by his tormentor's spear.

Cormac laid the young Frenchman in the shade cast by the motionless stallion and trickled water through the parched lips from his canteen. As soon as he could speak, Michael croaked: “Now I know in truth that I am dead, for there is but one knight ever rode in Outremer who could cast a long lance like a javelin – and Cormac FitzGeoffrey has been dead for many months. But if I be dead, where is Gerard – and Yulala?”

“Rest and be at ease,” growled Cormac. “You live – and so do I.”

He loosed the cords that had cut deep into the flesh of Michael’s wrists and set himself to gently rub and massage the numb arms. Slowly the delirium faded from the youth’s eyes. Like Cormac, he too came of a race that was tough as spring steel; an hour’s rest and plenty of water, and his intense vitality asserted itself.

“How long have you hung from this gibbet?” asked Cormac.

“Since dawn.” Michael’s eyes were grim as he rubbed his lacerated wrists. “Nureddin and Kosru Malik said that since Sieur Gerard once hanged one of their race here, it was fitting that one of Gerard’s men should grace this gibbet.”

“Tell me how Gerard died,” growled the Irish warrior. “Men hint at foul tales – ”

Michael’s fine eyes filled with tears. “Ah, Cormac, I who loved him, brought about his death. Listen – there is more to this than meets the casual eye. I think that Nureddin and his comrade-at-arms have been stung by the hornet of empire. It is in my mind that they, with various dog-knights among the Franks, dream of a mongrel kingdom among these hills, which shall hold allegiance neither to Saladin nor any king of the West.

“They begin to broaden their holdings by treachery. The nearest Christian hold was that of Ali-El-Yar, of course. Sieur Gerard was a true knight, peace be upon his fair soul, and he must be removed. All this I learned later – would to God I had known it beforehand! Among Nureddin’s slaves is a Persian girl named Yulala, and with this innocent tool of their evil wishes, the twain sought to ensnare my lord – to slay at once his body and his good name. And God help me, through me they succeeded where otherwise they had failed.

“For my lord Gerard was honorable beyond all men. When in peace, and at Nureddin’s invitation, he visited El Ghor, he paid no heed to Yulala’s blandishments. For according to the commands of her masters, which she dared not disobey, the girl allowed Gerard to look on her, unveiled, as if by

chance, and she pretended affection for him. But Gerard gave her no heed. But I – I fell victim to her charms."

Cormac snorted in disgust. Michael clutched his arm.

"Cormac," he cried, "bethink you – all men are not iron like you! I swear I loved Yulala from the moment I first set eyes on her – and she loved me! I contrived to see her again – to steal into El Ghor itself – "

"Whence men got the tale that it was Gerard who was carrying on an affair with Nureddin's slave," snarled FitzGeoffrey.

Michael hid his face in his hands. "Mine the fault," he groaned. "Then one night a mute brought a note signed by Yulala – apparently – begging me to come with Sieur Gerard and his men-at-arms and save her from a frightful fate – our love had been discovered, the note read, and they were about to torture her. I was wild with rage and fear. I went to Gerard and told him all, and he, white soul of honor, vowed to aid me. He could not break the truce and bring Saladin's wrath upon the Christians' cities, but he donned his mail and rode forth alone with me. We would see if there was any way whereby we might steal Yulala away, secretly; if not, my lord would go boldly to Nureddin and ask the girl as a gift, or offer to pay a great ransom for her. I would marry her.

"Well, when we reached the place outside the wall of El Ghor, where I was wont to meet Yulala, we found we were trapped. Nureddin, Kosru Malik and their warriors rose suddenly about us on all sides. Nureddin first spoke to Gerard, telling him of the trap he had set and baited, hoping to entice my lord into his power alone. And the Moslem laughed to think that the chance love of a squire had drawn Gerard into the trap where the carefully wrought plan had failed. As for the missive – Nureddin wrote that himself, believing, in his craftiness, that Sieur Gerard would do just as indeed he did.

"Nureddin and the Turk offered to allow Gerard to join them in their plan of empire. They told him plainly that his castle and lands were the price a certain powerful nobleman asked in return for his alliance, and they offered alliance with Gerard instead of this noble. Sieur Gerard merely answered that so long as life remained in him, he would keep faith with his king and his creed, and at the word the Moslems rolled on us like a wave.

"Ah, Cormac, Cormac, had you but been there with our men-at-arms! Gerard bore himself right manfully as was his wont – back to back we fought and I swear to you that we trod a knee-deep carpet of the dead before

Gerard fell and they dragged me down. ‘Christ and the Cross!’ were his last words, as the Turkish spears and swords pierced him through and through. And his fair body – naked and gashed, and thrown to the kites and the jackals!”

Michael sobbed convulsively, beating his fists together in his agony. Cormac rumbled deep in his chest like a savage bull. Blue lights burned and flickered in his eyes.

“And you?” he asked harshly.

“Me they flung into a dungeon for torture,” answered Michael, “but that night Yulala came to me. An old servitor who loved her, and who had dwelt in El Ghor before it fell to Nureddin, freed me and led us both through a secret passage that leads from the torture chamber, beyond the wall. We went into the hills on foot and without weapons and wandered there for days, hiding from the horsemen sent forth to hunt us down. Yesterday we were recaptured and brought back to El Ghor. An arrow had struck down the old slave who showed us the passageway, unknown to the present masters of the castle, and we refused to tell how we had escaped though Nureddin threatened us with torture. This dawn he brought me forth from the castle and hanged me to this gibbet, leaving that one to guard me. What he has done to Yulala, God alone knows.”

“You knew that Ali-El-Yar had fallen?”

“Aye,” Michael nodded dully. “Kosru Malik boasted of it. The lands of Gerard now fall heir to his enemy, the traitor knight who will come to Nureddin’s aid when the Moslem strikes for a crown.”

“And who is this traitor?” asked Cormac softly.

“The baron Conrad von Gonler, whom I swear to spit like a hare – ”

Cormac smiled thinly and bleakly. “Swear me no oaths. Von Gonler has been in Hell since dawn. I knew only that he refused to come to Gerard’s aid. I could have slain him no deader had I known his whole infamy.”

Michael’s eyes blazed. “A de Gissclin to the rescue!” he shouted fiercely. “I thank thee, old war-dog! One traitor is accounted for – what now? Shall Nureddin and the Turk live while two men wear de Gissclin steel?”

“Not if steel cuts and blood runs red,” snarled Cormac. “Tell me of this secret way – nay, waste no time in words – *show* me this secret way. If you escaped thereby, why should we not enter the same way? Here – take the arms from that carrion while I catch his steed which I see browses on the

moss among the rocks. Night is not far away; mayhap we can gain through to the interior of the castle – there – ”

His big hands clenched into iron sledges and his terrible eyes blazed; in his whole bearing there was apparent a plain tale of fire and carnage, of spears piercing bosoms and swords splitting skulls.

IV
The Faith of Cormac

When Cormac FitzGeoffrey took up the trail to El Ghor again, one would have thought at a glance that a Turk rode with him. Michael de Blois rode the bay Turkoman steed and wore the peaked Turkish helmet. He was girt with the curved scimitar and carried the bow and quiver of arrows, but he did not wear the mail shirt; the hammering hoofs of the plunging stallion had battered and brayed it out of all usefulness.

The companions took a circuitous route into the hills to avoid outposts, and it was dusk before they looked down on the towers of El Ghor which stood, grim and sullen, girt on three sides by scowling hills. Westward a broad road wound down the steeps on which the castle stood. On all other sides ravine-cut slopes straggled to the beetling walls. They had made such a wide circle that they now stood in the hills almost directly east of the keep, and Cormac, gazing westward over the turrets, spoke suddenly to his friend.

"Look – a cloud of dust far out on the plain – "

Michael shook his head: "Your eyes are far keener than mine. The hills are so clouded with the blue shadows of twilight I can scarcely make out the blurred expanse that is the plain beyond, much less discern any movement upon it."

"My life has often depended on my eyesight," growled the Norman-Gael. "Look closely – see that tongue of plains-land that cleaves far into the hills like a broad valley, to the north? A band of horsemen, riding hard, are just entering the defiles, if I may judge by the cloud of dust they raise. Doubtless a band of raiders returning to El Ghor. Well – they are in the hills now where going is rough and it will be hours before they get to the castle. Let us to our task – stars are blinking in the east."

They tied their horses in a place hidden from sight of any watcher below down among the gullies. In the last dim light of dusk they saw the turbans of the sentries on the towers, but gliding among boulders and defiles, they kept well concealed. At last Michael turned into a deep ravine.

"This leads into the subterranean corridor," said he. "God grant it has not been discovered by Nureddin. He had his warriors searching for something

of the sort, suspecting its existence when we refused to tell how we had escaped."

They passed along the ravine, which grew narrower and deeper, for some distance, feeling their way; then Michael halted with a groan. Cormac, groping forward, felt iron bars, and as his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, made out an opening like the mouth of a cave. Solid iron sills had been firmly bolted into the solid rock, and into these sills were set heavy bars, too close together to allow the most slender human to slip through.

"They have found the tunnel and closed it," groaned Michael. "Cormac, what are we to do?"

Cormac came closer and laid hands tentatively on the bars. Night had fallen and it was so dark in the ravine even his cat-like eyes could hardly make out objects close at hand. The big Norman-Celt took a deep breath, and gripping a bar in each mighty hand, braced his iron legs and slowly exerted all his incredible strength. Michael, watching in amazement, sensed rather than saw the great muscles roll and swell under the pliant mail, the veins swell in the giant's forehead and sweat burst out. The bars groaned and creaked, and even as Michael remembered that this man was stronger than King Richard himself, the breath burst from Cormac's lips in an explosive grunt and simultaneously the bars gave way like reeds in his iron hands. One came away, literally torn from its sockets, and the others bent deeply. Cormac gasped and shook the sweat out of his eyes, tossing the bar aside.

"By the saints," muttered Michael, "are you man or devil, Cormac FitzGeoffrey? That is a feat I deemed even beyond your power."

"Enough words," grunted the Norman. "Let us make haste, if we can squeeze through. It's likely that we'll find a guard in this tunnel, but it's a chance we must take. Draw your steel and follow me."

It was as dark as the maw of Hades in the tunnel. They groped their way forward, expecting every minute to blunder into a trap, and Michael, stealing close at the heels of his friend, cursed the pounding of his own heart and wondered at the ability of the giant to move stealthily and with no rattling of arms.

To the comrades it seemed that they groped forward in the darkness for an eternity, and just as Michael leaned forward to whisper that he believed they were inside the castle's outer walls, a faint glow was observed ahead. Stealing warily forward they came to a sharp turn in the corridor around which shone the light. Peering cautiously about the corner they saw that the light emanated from a flickering torch thrust into a niche in the wall, and beside this stood a tall Turk, yawning as he leaned on his spear. Two other Moslems lay sleeping on their cloaks nearby. Evidently Nureddin did not lay too much trust in the bars with which he had blocked the entrance.

"The guard," whispered Michael, and Cormac nodded, stepping back and drawing his companion with him. The Norman-Gael's wary eyes had made out a flight of stone steps beyond the warriors, with a heavy door at the top.

"These seem to be all the weapon-men in the tunnel," muttered Cormac. "Loose a shaft at the waking warrior – and do not miss."

Michael fitted notch to string, and leaning close to the angle of the turn, aimed at the Turk's throat, just above the hauberk. He silently cursed the flickering, illusive light. Suddenly the drowsy warrior's head jerked up and he glared in their direction, suspicion flaring his eyes. Simultaneously came the twang of the loosed string and the Turk staggered and went down, gurgling horribly and clawing at the shaft that transfixed his bull neck.

The other two, awakened by their comrade's death throes and the sudden swift drum of feet on the ground, started up – and were cut down as they rubbed at sleep-filled eyes and groped for weapons.

“That was well done,” growled Cormac, shaking the red drops from his steel. “There was no sound that should have carried through yonder door. Still, if it be bolted from within, our work is useless and we undone.”

But it was not bolted, as the presence of the warriors in the tunnel suggested. As Cormac gently opened the heavy iron door, a sudden pain-fraught whimper from the other side electrified them.

“Yulala!” gasped Michael, whitening. “ ’Tis the torture chamber, and that is her voice! In God’s name, Cormac – in!”

And the big Norman-Gael recklessly flung the door wide and leaped through like a charging tiger, with Michael at his heels. They halted short. It was the torture chamber, right enough, and on the floor and the walls stood or hung all the hellish appliances that the mind of man has invented for the torment of his brother. Three people were in the dungeon and two of these were bestial-faced men in leathern breeches, who looked up, startled, as the Franks entered. The third was a girl who lay bound to a sort of bench, naked as the day she was born. Coals glowed in braziers nearby and one of the mutes was in the very act of reaching for a pair of white-hot pinchers. He crouched now, glaring in amazement, his arm still outstretched.

From the white throat of the captive girl burst a piteous cry.

“Yulala!” Michael cried out fiercely and leaped forward, a red mist floating before his eyes. One of the beast-faced mutes was before him, lifting a short sword, but the young Frank, without checking his stride, brought down his scimitar in a sweeping arc that drove the curved blade through scalp and skull. Wrenching his weapon free, he dropped to his knees beside the torture bench, a great sob tearing his throat.

“Yulala! Yulala! Oh girl, what have they done to you?”

“Michael, my beloved!” Her great dark eyes were like stars in the mist. “I knew you would come. They have not tortured me – save for a whipping – they were just about to begin – ”

The other mute had glided swiftly toward Cormac as a snake glides, knife in hand.

“Satan!” grunted the big warrior. “I won’t sully my steel with such blood _ ”

His left hand shot out and caught the mute’s wrist and there was a crunch of splintering bones. The knife flew from the mute’s fingers, which spread wide suddenly like an inflated glove. Blood burst from the finger tips and the creature’s mouth gaped in silent agony. And at that instant Cormac’s

right hand closed on his throat and through the open lips burst a red deluge of blood as the Norman's iron fingers ground flesh and vertebrae to a crimson pulp.

Flinging aside the sagging corpse, Cormac turned to Michael, who had freed the girl and now was nearly crushing her in his arms as he gripped her close in a very passion of relief and joy. A heavy hand on his shoulder brought him back to a realization of their position. Cormac had found a cloak and this he wrapped about the naked girl.

"Go, at once," he said swiftly. "It may not be long before others come to take the place of the guards in the tunnel. Here – you have no armor – take my shield – no, don't argue. You may need it to protect the girl from arrows if you – if we, are pursued. Haste now – "

"But you, Cormac?" Michael lingered, hesitant.

"I will make fast that outer door," said the Norman. "I can heap benches against it. Then I will follow you. But don't wait for me. This is a command, do you understand? Hasten through the tunnel and go to the horses. There, instantly mount the Turkoman horse and ride! I will follow by another route – aye, by a road none but I can ride! Ride ye to Sir Rupert de Vaile, Seneschal of Antioch. He is our friend; hasten now."

Cormac stood a moment in the doorway at the head of the stairs and watched Michael and the girl hurry down the steps, past the place where the silent sentries lay, and vanish about the turn in the tunnel. Then he turned back into the torture chamber and closed the door. He crossed the room, threw the bolt on the outer door and swung it wide. He gazed up a winding flight of stairs. Cormac's face was immobile. He had voluntarily sealed his doom.

The giant Norman-Celt was an opportunist. He knew that such chance as had led him into the heart of his foe's stronghold was not likely to favor him again. Life was uncertain in Outremer; if he waited another opportunity to strike at Nureddin and Kosru Malik, that opportunity might not come. This was his best opportunity for the vengeance for which his barbaric soul lusted.

That he would lose his own life in the consummating of that vengeance made no difference. Men were born to die in battle, according to his creed, and Cormac FitzGeoffrey secretly leaned toward the belief of his Viking ancestors in a Valhalla for the souls loosed gloriously in the clash of swords. Michael, having found the girl, had instantly forgotten the original

plan of vengeance. Cormac had no blame for him; life and love were sweet to the young. But the grim Irish warrior owed a debt to the murdered Gerard and was prepared to pay with his own life. Thus Cormac kept faith with the dead.

He wished that he could have bade Michael ride the black stallion, but he knew that the horse would allow none but himself to bestride it. Now it would fall into Moslem hands, he thought with a sigh. He went up the stairs.

V
The Lion of Islam

At the top of the stairs Cormac came into a corridor and along this he strode swiftly but warily, the Norse sword shimmering bluely in his hand. Going at random he turned into another corridor and here came full on a Turkish warrior, who stopped short, agape, seeing a supernatural horror in this grim slayer who strode like a silent phantom of death through the castle. Before the Turk could regain his wits, the blue sword shore through his neck cords.

Cormac stood above his victim for a moment, listening intently. Somewhere ahead of him he heard a low hum of voices, and the attitude of this Turk, with shield and drawn scimitar, had suggested that he stood guard before some chamber door. An irregular torch faintly illumined the wide corridor, and Cormac, groping in the semi-darkness for a door, found instead a wide portal masked by heavy silk curtains. Parting them cautiously he gazed through into a great room thronged with armed men.

Warriors in mail and peaked helmets, and bearing wide-pointed, curved swords, lined the walls, and on silken cushions sat the chieftains – rulers of El Ghor and their satellites. Across the room sat Nureddin El Ghor, tall, lean, with a high-bridged, thin nose and keen dark eyes, his whole aspect distinctly hawk-like. His Semitic features contrasted with the Turks about him. His lean strong hand continually caressed the ivory hilt of a long, lean saber and he wore a shirt of mesh-mail. A renegade chief from southern Arabia, this sheik was a man of great ability; his dream of an independent kingdom in these hills was no mad hashish hallucination. Let him win the alliance of a few Seljuk chiefs, of a few Frankish renegades like von Gonler, and with the hordes of Arabs, Turks and Kurds that would assuredly flock to his banner, Nureddin would be a menace both to Saladin and the Franks who still clung to the fringes of Outremer. Among the mailed Turks Cormac saw the sheepskin caps and wolfskins of wild chiefs from beyond the hills – Kurds and Turkomans. Already the Arab’s fame was spreading, if such unstable warriors as these were rallying to him.

Near the curtain-hung doorway sat Kosru Malik, known to Cormac of old, a warrior typical of his race, strongly built, of medium height, with a dark cruel face. Even as he sat in council he wore a peaked helmet and a

gilded mail hauberk and held across his knees a jeweled-hilted scimitar. It seemed to Cormac that these men argued some matter just before setting out on some raid, as they were all fully armed. But he wasted no time on speculation. He tore the hangings aside with a mailed hand and strode into the room.

Amazement held the warriors frozen for an instant, and in that instant the giant Frank reached Kosru Malik's side. The Turk, his dark features paling, sprang to his feet like a steel spring released, raising his scimitar, but even as he did so, Cormac braced his feet and smote with all his power. The Norse sword shivered the curved blade to blue sparks and, rending the gilded mail, severed the Turk's shoulder-bone and cleft his breast.

Cormac wrenched the heavy blade free from the split breast-bone and with one foot on Kosru Malik's body, faced his foes like a lion at bay. His helmed head was lowered, his cold blue eyes flaming from under the heavy black brows, and his mighty right hand held ready the stained sword. Nureddin had leaped to his feet and stood trembling in rage and astonishment. This sudden apparition came as near to unmanning him as anything had ever done. His thin, hawk-like features lowered in a wrathful snarl, his beard bristled and with a quick motion he unsheathed his ivory-hilted saber. Then even as he stepped forward and his warriors surged in behind him, a startling interruption occurred.

Cormac, a fierce joy surging in him as he braced himself for the charge, saw, on the other side of the great room, a wide door swing open and a host of armed warriors appear, accompanied by sundry of Nureddin's men, who wore empty scabbards and uneasy faces.

The Arab and his warriors whirled to face the newcomers. These men, Cormac saw, were dusty as if from long riding, and his memory flashed to the horsemen he had seen riding into the hills at dusk. Before them strode a tall, slender man, whose fine face was traced with lines of weariness, but whose aspect was that of a ruler of men. His garb was simple in comparison with the resplendent armor and silken attendants. And Cormac swore in amazed recognition.

Yet his surprize was no greater than that of the men of El Ghor.

"What do you in my castle, unannounced?" gasped Nureddin.

A giant in silvered mail raised his hand warningly and spoke sonorously: "The Lion of Islam, Protector of the Faithful, Yussef Ibn Eyyub, Salah-ud-

din, Sultan of Sultans, needs no announcement to enter yours, or any castle, Arab."

Nureddin stood his ground, though his followers began salaaming madly; there was iron in this Arabian renegade.

"My lord," said he stoutly, "it is true I did not recognize you when you first came into the chamber; but El Ghor is mine, not by virtue of right or aid or grant from any sultan, but the might of my own arm. Therefore, I make you welcome but do not beg your mercy for my hasty words."

Saladin merely smiled in a weary way. Half a century of intrigue and warring rested heavily on his shoulders. His brown eyes, strangely mild for so great a lord, rested on the silent Frankish giant who still stood with his mail-clad foot on what had been the chief Kosru Malik.

"And what is this?" asked the Sultan.

Nureddin scowled: "A Nazarene outlaw has stolen into my keep and assassinated my comrade, the Seljuk. I beg your leave to dispose of him. I will give you his skull, set in silver – "

A gesture stopped him. Saladin stepped past his men and confronted the dark, brooding warrior.

"I thought I had recognized those shoulders and that dark face," said the Sultan with a smile. "So you have turned your face east again, Lord Cormac?"

"Enough!" The deep voice of the Norman-Irish giant filled the chamber. "You have me in your trap; my life is forfeit. Waste not your time in taunts; send your jackals against me and make an end of it. I swear by my clan, many of them shall bite the dust before I die, and the dead will be more than the living!"

Nureddin's tall frame shook with passion; he gripped his hilt until the knuckles showed white. "Is this to be borne, my Lord?" he exclaimed fiercely. "Shall this Nazarene dog fling dirt into our faces – "

Saladin shook his head slowly, smiling as if at some secret jest: "It may be his is no idle boast. At Acre, at Azotus, at Joppa I have seen the skull on his shield glitter like a star of death in the mist, and the Faithful fall before his sword like garnered grain."

The great Kurd turned his head, leisurely surveying the ranks of silent warriors and the bewildered chieftains who avoided his level gaze.

"A notable concourse of chiefs, for these times of truce," he murmured, half to himself. "Would you ride forth in the night with all these warriors to

fight genii in the desert, or to honor some ghostly sultan, Nureddin? Nay, nay, Nureddin, thou hast tasted the cup of ambition, meseemeth – and thy life is forfeit!”

The unexpectedness of the accusation staggered Nureddin, and while he groped for reply, Saladin followed it up: “It comes to me that you have plotted against me – aye, that it was your purpose to seduce various Moslem and Frankish lords from their allegiances, and set up a kingdom of your own. And for that reason you broke the truce and murdered a good knight, albeit a Caphar, and burned his castle. I have spies, Nureddin.”

The tall Arab glanced quickly about, as if ready to dispute the question with Saladin himself. But when he noted the number of the Kurd’s warriors, and saw his own fierce ruffians shrinking away from him, awed, a smile of bitter contempt crossed his hawk-like features, and sheathing his blade, he folded his arms.

“God gives,” he said simply, with the fatalism of the Orient.

Saladin nodded in appreciation, but motioned back a chief who stepped forward to bind the sheik. “Here is one,” said the Sultan, “to whom you owe a greater debt than to me, Nureddin. I have heard Cormac FitzGeoffrey was brother-at-arms to the Sieur Gerard. You owe many debts of blood, oh Nureddin; pay one, therefore, by facing the lord Cormac with the sword.”

The Arab’s eyes gleamed suddenly. “And if I slay him – shall I go free?”

“Who am I to judge?” asked Saladin. “It shall be as Allah wills it. But if you fight the Frank you will die, Nureddin, even though you slay him; he comes of a breed that slays even in their death-throes. Yet it is better to die by the sword than by the cord, Nureddin.”

The sheik’s answer was to draw his ivory-hilted saber. Blue sparks flickered in Cormac’s eyes and he rumbled deeply like a wounded lion. He hated Saladin as he hated all his race, with the savage and relentless hatred of the Norman-Celt. He had ascribed the Kurd’s courtesy to King Richard and the Crusaders to Oriental subtlety, refusing to believe that there could

be ought but trickery and craftiness in a Saracen's mind. Now he saw in the Sultan's suggestion but the scheming of a crafty trickster to match two of his foes against each other, and a feline-like gloating over his victims. Cormac grinned without mirth. He asked no more from life than to have his enemy at sword-points. But he felt no gratitude toward Saladin, only a smoldering hate.

The Sultan and the warriors gave back, leaving the rivals a clear space in the center of the great room. Nureddin came forward swiftly, having donned a plain round steel cap with a mail drop that fell about his shoulders.

"Death to you, Nazarene!" he yelled, and sprang in with the pantherish leap and headlong recklessness of an Arab's attack. Cormac had no shield. He parried the hacking saber with upflung blade, and slashed back. Nureddin caught the heavy blade on his round buckler, which he turned slightly slantwise at the instant of impact, so that the stroke glanced off. He returned the blow with a thrust that rasped against Cormac's coif, and leaped a spear's length backward to avoid the whistling sweep of the Norse sword.

Again he leaped in, slashing, and Cormac caught the saber on his left forearm. Mail links parted beneath the keen edge and blood spattered, but almost simultaneously the Norse sword crashed under the Arab's arm, bones cracked and Nureddin was flung his full length to the floor. Warriors gasped as they realized the full power of the Irishman's tigerish strokes.

Nureddin's rise from the floor was so quick that he almost seemed to rebound from his fall. To the onlookers it seemed that he was not hurt, but the Arab knew. His mail had held; the sword edge had not gashed his flesh, but the impact of that terrible blow had snapped a rib like a rotten twig, and the realization that he could not long avoid the Frank's rushes filled him with a wild beast determination to take his foe with him to Eternity.

Cormac was looming over Nureddin, sword high, but the Arab, nerving himself to a dynamic burst of superhuman quickness, sprang up as a cobra leaps from its coil, and struck with desperate power. Full on Cormac's bent head the whistling saber clashed, and the Frank staggered as the keen edge bit through steel cap and coif links into his scalp. Blood jetted down his face, but he braced his feet and struck back with all the power of arm and shoulders behind the sword. Again Nureddin's buckler blocked the stroke,

but this time the Arab had no time to turn the shield, and the heavy blade struck squarely. Nureddin went to his knees beneath the stroke, bearded face twisted in agony. With tenacious courage he reeled up again, shaking the shattered buckler from his numbed and broken arm, but even as he lifted the saber, the Norse sword crashed down, cleaving the Moslem helmet and splitting the skull to the teeth.

Cormac set a foot on his fallen foe and wrenched free his gory sword. His fierce eyes met the whimsical gaze of Saladin.

"Well, Saracen," said the Irish warrior challengingly, "I have killed your rebel for you."

"And your enemy," reminded Saladin.

"Aye," Cormac grinned bleakly and ferociously. "I thank you – though well I know it was no love of me or mine that prompted you to send the Arab against me. Well – make an end, Saracen."

"Why do you hate me, Lord Cormac?" asked the Sultan curiously.

Cormac snarled. "Why do I hate any of my foes? You are no more and no less than any other robber chief, to me. You tricked Richard and the rest with courtly words and fine deeds, but you never deceived me, who well knew you sought to win by deceit where you could not gain by force of arms."

Saladin shook his head, murmuring to himself. Cormac glared at him, tensing himself for a sudden leap that would carry the Kurd with him into the Dark. The Norman-Gael was a product of his age and his country; among the warring chiefs of blood-drenched Ireland, mercy was unknown and chivalry an outworn and forgotten myth. Kindness to a foe was a mark of weakness; courtesy to an enemy a form of craft, a preparation for treachery; to such teachings had Cormac grown up, in a land where a man took every advantage, gave no quarter and fought like a blood-mad devil if he expected to survive.

Now at a gesture from Saladin, those crowding the door gave back.

"Your way is open, Lord Cormac."

The Gael glared, his eyes narrowing to slits: "What game is this?" he growled. "Shall I turn my back to your blades? Out on it!"

"All swords are in their sheaths," answered the Kurd. "None shall harm you."

Cormac's lion-like head swung from side to side as he glared at the Moslems.

“You honestly mean I am to go free, after breaking the truce and slaying your jackals?”

“The truce was already broken,” answered Saladin. “I find in you no fault. You have repaid blood for blood, and kept your faith to the dead. You are rough and savage, but I would fain have men like you in mine own train. There is a fierce loyalty in you, and for this I honor you.”

Cormac sheathed his sword ungraciously. A grudging admiration for this weary-faced Moslem was born in him and it angered him. Dimly he realized at last that this attitude of fairness, justice and kindliness, even to foes, was not a crafty pose of Saladin’s, not a manner of guile, but a natural nobility of the Kurd’s nature. He saw suddenly embodied in the Sultan, the ideals of chivalry and high honor so much talked of – and so little practiced – by the Frankish knights. Blondel had been right then, and Sieur Gerard, when they argued with Cormac that high-minded chivalry was no mere romantic dream of an outworn age, but had existed, and still existed and lived in the hearts of certain men. But Cormac was born and bred in a savage land where men lived the desperate existence of the wolves whose hides covered their nakedness. He suddenly realized his own innate barbarism and was ashamed. He shrugged his lion’s shoulders.

“I have misjudged you, Moslem,” he growled. “There is fairness in you.”

“I thank you, Lord Cormac,” smiled Saladin. “Your road to the west is clear.”

And the Moslem warriors courteously salaamed as Cormac FitzGeoffrey strode from the royal presence of the slender noble who was Protector of the Caliphs, Lion of Islam, Sultan of Sultans.

The Blood of Belshazzar

It shone on the breast of the Persian king,
It lighted Iskander’s road;
It blazed where the spears were splintering,
A lure and a maddening goad.
And down through the crimson, changing years
It draws men, soul and brain;
They drown their lives in blood and tears,
And they break their hearts in vain.
Oh, it flames with the blood of strong men’s hearts
Whose bodies are clay again.

– The Song of the Red Stone

I

Once it was called Eski-Hissar, the Old Castle, for it was very ancient even when the first Seljuks swept out of the east, and not even the Arabs, who rebuilt that crumbling pile in the days of Abu Bekr, knew what hands reared those massive bastions among the frowning foothills of the Taurus. Now, since the old keep had become a bandit's hold, men called it Bab-el-Shaitan, the Gate of the Devil, and with good reason.

That night there was feasting in the great hall. Heavy tables loaded with wine pitchers and jugs, and huge platters of food, stood flanked by crude benches for such as ate in that manner, while on the floor large cushions received the reclining forms of others. Trembling slaves hastened about, filling goblets from wineskins and bearing great joints of roasted meat and loaves of bread.

Here luxury and nakedness met, the riches of degenerate civilizations and the stark savagery of utter barbarism. Men clad in stenching sheepskins lolled on silken cushions, exquisitely brocaded, and guzzled from solid golden goblets, fragile as the stem of a desert flower. They wiped their bearded lips and hairy hands on velvet tapestries worthy of a shah's palace.

All the races of western Asia met here. Here were slim, lethal Persians, dangerous-eyed Turks in mail shirts, lean Arabs, tall ragged Kurds, Lurs and Armenians in sweaty sheepskins, fiercely mustached Circassians, even a few Georgians, with hawk-faces and devilish tempers.

Among them was one who stood out boldly from all the rest. He sat at a table drinking wine from a huge goblet, and the eyes of the others strayed to him continually. Among these tall sons of the desert and mountains his height did not seem particularly great, though it was above six feet. But the breadth and thickness of him were gigantic. His shoulders were broader, his limbs more massive than any other warrior there.

His mail coif was thrown back, revealing a lion-like head and a great corded throat. Though browned by the sun, his face was not as dark as those about him and his eyes were a volcanic blue, which smoldered continually as if from inner fires of wrath. Square-cut black hair like a lion's mane crowned a low, broad forehead.

He ate and drank apparently oblivious to the questioning glances flung toward him. Not that any had as yet challenged his right to feast in Bab-el-

Shaitan, for this was a lair open to all refugees and outlaws. And this Frank was Cormac FitzGeoffrey, outlawed and hunted by his own race. The ex-Crusader was armed in close-meshed chain mail from head to foot. A heavy sword hung at his hip, and his kite-shaped shield with the grinning skull wrought in the center lay with his heavy vizorless helmet on the bench beside him. There was no hypocrisy of etiquette in Bab-el-Shaitan. Its occupants went armed to the teeth at all times and no one questioned another's right to sit down to meat with his sword at hand.

Cormac, as he ate, scanned his fellow-feasters openly. Truly Bab-el-Shaitan was a lair of the spawn of hell, the last retreat of men so desperate and bestial that the rest of the world had cast them out in horror. Cormac was no stranger to savage men; in his native Ireland he had sat among barbaric figures in the gatherings of chiefs and reavers in the hills. But the wild-beast appearance and utter inhumanness of some of these men impressed even the fierce Irish warrior.

There, for instance, was a Lur, hairy as an ape, tearing at a half-raw joint of meat with yellow fangs like a wolf's. Kadra Muhammad, the fellow's name was, and Cormac wondered briefly if such a creature could have a human soul. Or that shaggy Kurd beside him, whose lip, twisted back by a sword scar into a permanent snarl, bared a tooth like a boar's tusk. Surely no divine spark of soul-dust animated these men, but the merciless and soulless spirit of the grim land that bred them. Eyes, wild and cruel as the eyes of wolves, glared through lank strands of tangled hair, hairy hands unconsciously gripped the hilts of knives even while the owners gorged and guzzled.

Cormac glanced from the rank and file to scrutinize the leaders of the band – those whom superior wit or war-skill had placed high in the confidence of their terrible chief, Skol Abdhur, the Butcher. Not one but had a whole volume of black and bloody history behind him. There was that slim Persian, whose tone was so silky, whose eyes were so deadly, and whose small, shapely head was that of a human panther – Nadir Tous, once an emir high in the favor of the Shah of Kharesmia. And that Seljuk Turk, with his silvered mail shirt, peaked helmet and jewel-hilted scimitar – Kai Shah; he had ridden at Saladin's side in high honor once, and it was said that the scar which showed white in the angle of his jaw had been made by the sword of Richard the Lion-hearted in that great battle before the walls of Joppa. And that wiry, tall, eagle-faced Arab, Yussef el Mekru – he had been

a great sheikh once in Yemen and had even led a revolt against the Sultan himself.

But at the head of the table at which Cormac sat was one whose history for strangeness and vivid fantasy dimmed them all. Tisolino di Strozza, trader, captain of Venice's warships, Crusader, pirate, outlaw – what a red trail the man had followed to his present casteless condition! Di Strozza was tall and thin and saturnine in appearance, with a hook-nosed, thin-nostriled face of distinctly predatory aspect. His armor, now worn and tarnished, was of costly Venetian make, and the hilt of his long narrow sword had once been set with gems. He was a man of restless soul, thought Cormac, as he watched the Venetian's dark eyes dart continually from point to point, and the lean hand repeatedly lifted to twist the ends of the thin mustache.

Cormac's gaze wandered to the other chiefs – wild reavers, born to the red trade of pillage and murder, whose pasts were black enough, but lacked the varied flavor of the other four. He knew these by sight or reputation – Kojar Mirza, a brawny Kurd; Shalmar Khor, a tall swaggering Circassian; and Justus Zehor, a renegade Georgian who wore half a dozen knives in his girdle.

There was one not known to him, a warrior who apparently had no standing among the bandits, yet who carried himself with the assurance born of prowess. He was of a type rare in the Taurus – a stocky, strongly built man whose head would come no higher than Cormac's shoulder. Even as he ate, he wore a helmet with a lacquered leather drop, and Cormac caught the glint of mail beneath his sheepskins; through his girdle was thrust a short wide-bladed sword, not curved as much as the Moslem scimitars. His powerful bowed legs, as well as the slanting black eyes set in an inscrutable brown face, betrayed the Mongol.

He, like Cormac, was a newcomer; riding from the east he had arrived at Bab-el-Shaitan that night at the same time that the Irish warrior had ridden in from the south. His name, as given in guttural Turki, was Toghrul Khan.

A slave whose scarred face and fear-dulled eyes told of the brutality of his masters, tremblingly filled Cormac's goblet. He started and flinched as a sudden scream faintly knifed the din; it came from somewhere above, and none of the feasters paid any attention. The Norman-Gael wondered at the absence of women-slaves. Skol Abdhur's name was a terror in that part of Asia and many caravans felt the weight of his fury. Many women had been

stolen from raided villages and camel-trains, yet now there were apparently only men in Bab-el-Shaitan. This, to Cormac, held a sinister implication. He recalled dark tales, whispered under the breath, relating to the cryptic inhumanness of the robber chief – mysterious hints of foul rites in black caverns, of naked white victims writhing on hideously ancient altars, of blood-chilling sacrifices beneath the midnight moon. But that cry had been no woman's scream.

Kai Shah was close to di Strozza's shoulder, talking very rapidly in a guarded tone. Cormac saw that Nadir Tous was only pretending to be absorbed in his wine cup; the Persian's eyes, burning with intensity, were fixed on the two who whispered at the head of the table. Cormac, alert to intrigue and counter-plot, had already decided that there were factions in Bab-el-Shaitan. He had noticed that di Strozza, Kai Shah, a lean Syrian scribe named Musa bin Daoud, and the wolfish Lur, Kadra Muhammad, stayed close to each other, while Nadir Tous had his own following among the lesser bandits, wild ruffians, mostly Persians and Armenians, and Kojar Mirza was surrounded by a number of even wilder mountain Kurds. The manner of the Venetian and Nadir Tous toward each other was of a wary courtesy that seemed to mask suspicion, while the Kurdish chief wore an aspect of truculent defiance toward both.

As these thoughts passed through Cormac's mind, an incongruous figure appeared on the landing of the broad stairs. It was Jacob, Skol Abdhur's majordomo – a short, very fat Jew attired in gaudy and costly robes which had once decked a Syrian harem master. All eyes turned toward him, for it was evident he had brought word from his master – not often did Skol Abdhur, wary as a hunted wolf, join his pack at their feasts.

"The great prince, Skol Abdhur," announced Jacob in pompous and sonorous accents, "would grant audience to the Nazarene who rode in at dusk – the lord Cormac FitzGeoffrey."

The Norman finished his goblet at a draft and rose deliberately, taking up his shield and helmet.

"And what of me, Yahouda?" It was the guttural voice of the Mongol. "Has the great prince no word for Toghrul Khan, who has ridden far and hard to join his horde? Has he said naught of an audience with me?"

The Jew scowled. “Lord Skol said naught of any Tartar,” he answered shortly. “Wait until he sends for you, as he will do – if it so pleases him.”

The answer was as much an insult to the haughty pagan as would have been a slap in the face. He half made to rise then sank back, his face, schooled to iron control, showing little of his rage. But his serpent-like eyes glittering devilishly, took in not only the Jew but Cormac as well, and the Norman knew that he himself was included in Toghrul Khan’s black anger. Mongol pride and Mongol wrath are beyond the ken of the Western mind, but Cormac knew that in his humiliation, the nomad hated him as much as he hated Jacob.

But Cormac could count his friends on his fingers and his personal enemies by the scores. A few more foes made little difference and he paid no heed to Toghrul Khan as he followed the Jew up the broad stairs, and along a winding corridor to a heavy, metal-braced door before which stood, like an image carven of black basalt, a huge naked Nubian who held a two-handed scimitar whose five-foot blade was a foot wide at the tip.

Jacob made a sign to the Nubian, but Cormac saw that the Jew was trembling and apprehensive.

“In God’s name,” Jacob whispered to the Norman, “speak him softly; Skol is in a devilish temper tonight. Only a little while ago he tore out the eyeball of a slave with his hands.”

“That was that scream I heard then,” grunted Cormac. “Well, don’t stand there chattering; tell that black beast to open the door before I knock it down.”

Jacob blenched; but it was no idle threat. It was not the Norman-Gael’s nature to wait meekly at the door of any man – he who had been cup-companion to King Richard. The majordomo spoke swiftly to the mute, who swung the door open. Cormac pushed past his guide and strode across the threshold.

And for the first time he looked on Skol Abdhur the Butcher, whose deeds of blood had already made him a semi-mythical figure. The Norman saw a bizarre giant reclining on a silken divan, in the midst of a room hung and furnished like a king’s. Erect, Skol would have towered half a head taller than Cormac, and though a huge belly marred the symmetry of his figure, he was still an image of physical prowess. His short, naturally black

beard had been stained to a bluish tint; his wide black eyes blazed with a curious wayward look not altogether sane at times.

He was clad in cloth-of-gold slippers whose toes turned up extravagantly, in voluminous Persian trousers of rare silk, and a wide green silken sash, heavy with golden scales, was wrapt about his waist. Above this he wore a sleeveless jacket, richly brocaded, open in front, but beneath this his huge torso was naked. His blue-black hair, held by a gemmed circlet of gold, fell to his shoulders, and his fingers were gleaming with jewels, while his bare arms were weighted with heavy gem-crusted armlets. Women's earrings adorned his ears.

Altogether his appearance was of such fantastic barbarism as to inspire in Cormac an amazement which in an ordinary man would have been a feeling of utmost horror. The apparent savagery of the giant, together with his fantastic finery which heightened rather than lessened the terror of his appearance, lent Skol Abdhur an aspect which set him outside the pale of ordinary humanity. The effect of an ordinary man, so garbed, would have been merely ludicrous; in the robber chieftain it was one of horror.

Yet as Jacob salaamed to the floor in a very frenzy of obeisance, he was not sure that Skol looked any more formidable than the mail-clad Frank with his aspect of dynamic and terrible strength directed by a tigerish nature.

"The lord Cormac FitzGeoffrey, oh mighty prince," proclaimed Jacob, while Cormac stood like an iron image not deigning even to incline his lion-like head.

"Yes, fool, I can see that," Skol's voice was deep and resonant. "Take yourself hence before I crop your ears. And see that those fools downstairs have plenty of wine."

From the stumbling haste with which Jacob obeyed, Cormac knew the threat of cropping ears was no empty one. Now his eyes wandered to a shocking and pitiful figure – the slave standing behind Skol's divan ready to pour wine for his grim master. The wretch was trembling in every limb as a wounded horse quivers, and the reason was apparent – a ghastly gaping socket from which the eye had been ruthlessly ripped. Blood still oozed from the rim to join the stains which blotched the twisted face and spotted the silken garments. Pitiful finery! Skol dressed his miserable slaves in apparel rich merchants might envy. And the wretch stood shivering in agony, yet not daring to move from his tracks, though with the pain-misted

half-sight remaining him, he could scarcely see to fill the gem-crusted goblet Skol lifted.

"Come and sit on the divan with me, Cormac," hailed Skol, "I would speak to you. Dog! Fill the lord Frank's goblet, and haste, lest I take your other eye."

"I drink no more this night," growled Cormac, thrusting aside the goblet Skol held out to him. "And send that slave away. He'll spill wine on you in his blindness."

Skol stared at Cormac a moment and then with a sudden laugh waved the pain-sick slave toward the door. The man went hastily, whimpering in agony.

"See," said Skol, "I humor your whim. But it was not necessary. I would have wrung his neck after we had talked, so he could not repeat our words."

Cormac shrugged his shoulders. Little use to try to explain to Skol that it was pity for the slave and not desire for secrecy that prompted him to have the man dismissed.

"What think you of my kingdom, Bab-el-Shaitan?" asked Skol suddenly.

"It would be hard to take," answered the Norman.

Skol laughed wildly and emptied his goblet.

"So the Seljuks have found," he hiccupped. "I took it years ago by a trick from the Turk who held it. Before the Turks came the Arabs held it and before them – the devil knows. It is old – the foundations were built in the long ago by Iskander Akbar – Alexander the Great. Then centuries later came the Roumi – the Romans – who added to it. Parthians, Persians, Kurds, Arabs, Turks – all have shed blood on its walls. Now it is mine, and while I live, mine it shall remain! I know its secrets – and its secrets," he cast the Frank a sly and wicked glance full of sinister meaning, "are more than most men reckon – even those fools Nadir Tous and di Strozza, who would cut my throat if they dared."

"How do you hold supremacy over these wolves?" asked Cormac bluntly.

Skol laughed and drank once more.

"I have something each wishes. They hate each other; I play them against one another. I hold the key to the plot. They do not trust each other enough to move against me. I am Skol Abdhur! Men are puppets to dance on my strings. And women" – a vagrant and curious glint stole into his eyes – "women are food for the gods," he said strangely.

“Many men serve me,” said Skol Abdhur, “emirs and generals and chiefs, as you saw. How came they here to Bab-el-Shaitan where the world ends? Ambition – intrigues – women – jealousy – hatred – now they serve the Butcher. And what brought you here, my brother? That you are an outlaw I know – that your life is forfeit to your people because you slew a certain emir of the Franks, one Count Conrad von Gonler. But only when hope is dead do men ride to Bab-el-Shaitan. There are cycles within cycles, outlaws beyond the pale of outlawry, and Bab-el-Shaitan is the end of the world.”

“Well,” growled Cormac, “one man can not raid the caravans. My friend Sir Rupert de Vaile, Seneschal of Antioch, is captive to the Turkish chief Ali Bahadur, and the Turk refuses to ransom him for the gold that has been offered. You ride far, and fall on the caravans that bring the treasures of Hind and Cathay. With you I may find some treasure so rare that the Turk will accept it as a ransom. If not, with my share of the loot I will hire enough bold rogues to rescue Sir Rupert.”

Skol shrugged his shoulders. “Franks are mad,” said he, “but whatever the reason, I am glad you rode hither. I have heard you are faithful to the lord you follow, and I need such a man. Just now I trust no one but Abdullah, the black mute that guards my chamber.”

It was evident to Cormac that Skol was fast becoming drunk. Suddenly he laughed wildly.

“You asked me how I hold my wolves in leash? Not one but would slit my throat. But look – so far I trust you I will show you why they do not!”

He reached into his girdle and drew forth a huge jewel which sparkled like a tiny lake of blood in his great palm. Even Cormac’s eyes narrowed at the sight.

“Satan!” he muttered. “That can be naught but the ruby called – ”

“The Blood of Belshazzar!” exclaimed Skol Abdhur. “Aye, the gem Cyrus the Persian ripped from the sword-gashed bosom of the great king on that red night when Babylon fell! It is the most ancient and costly gem in the world. Ten thousand pieces of heavy gold could not buy it.

“Hark, Frank,” again Skol drained a goblet, “I will tell you the tale of the Blood of Belshazzar. See you how strangely it is carved?”

He held it up and the light flashed redly from its many facets. Cormac shook his head, puzzled. The carving was strange indeed, corresponding to nothing he had ever seen, east or west. It seemed that the ancient carver had followed some plan entirely unknown and apart from that of modern

lapidary art. It was basically *different* with a difference Cormac could not define.

"No mortal cut that stone!" said Skol, "but the djinn of the sea! For once in the long, long ago, in the very dawn of happenings, the great king, even Belshazzar, went from his palace on pleasure bent and coming to the Green Sea – the Persian Gulf – went thereon in a royal galley, golden-prowed and rowed by a hundred slaves. Now there was one Naka, a diver of pearls, who desiring greatly to honor his king, begged the royal permission to seek the ocean bottom for rare pearls for the king, and Belshazzar granting his wish, Naka dived. Inspired by the glory of the king, he went far beyond the depth of divers, and after a time floated to the surface, grasping in his hand a ruby of rare beauty – aye, this very gem.

"Then the king and his lords, gazing on its strange carvings, were amazed, and Naka, nigh to death because of the great depth to which he had gone, gasped out a strange tale of a silent, seaweed-festooned city of marble and lapis lazuli far below the surface of the sea, and of a monstrous mummied king on a jade throne from whose dead taloned hand Naka had wrested the ruby. And then the blood burst from the diver's mouth and ears and he died.

"Then Belshazzar's lords entreated him to throw the gem back into the sea, for it was evident that it was the treasure of the djinn of the sea, but the king was as one mad, gazing into the crimson deeps of the ruby, and he shook his head.

"And lo, soon evil came upon him, for the Persians broke his kingdom, and Cyrus, looting the dying monarch, wrested from his bosom the great ruby which seemed so gory in the light of the burning palace that the soldiers shouted: 'Lo, it is the heart's blood of Belshazzar!' And so men came to call the gem the Blood of Belshazzar.

"Blood followed its course. When Cyrus fell on the Jaxartes, Queen Tomyris seized the jewel and for a time it gleamed on the naked bosom of the Scythian queen. But she was despoiled of it by a rebel general; in a battle against the Persians he fell and it went into the hands of Cambyses, who carried it with him into Egypt, where a priest of Bast stole it. A Numidian mercenary murdered him for it, and by devious ways it came

back to Persia once more. It gleamed on Xerxes' crown when he watched his army destroyed at Salamis.

"Alexander took it from the corpse of Darius and on the Macedonian's corselet its gleams lighted the road to India. A chance sword blow struck it from his breastplate in a battle on the Indus and for centuries the Blood of Belshazzar was lost to sight. Somewhere far to the east, we know, its gleams shone on a road of blood and rapine, and men slew men and dishonored women for it. For it, as of old, women gave up their virtue, men their lives and kings their crowns.

"But at last its road turned to the west once more, and I took it from the body of a Turkoman chief I slew in a raid far to the east. How he came by it, I do not know. But now it is mine!"

Skol was drunk; his eyes blazed with inhuman passion; more and more he seemed like some foul bird of prey.

"It is my balance of power! Men come to me from palace and hovel, each hoping to have the Blood of Belshazzar for his own. I play them against each other. If one should slay me for it, the others would instantly cut him to pieces to gain it. They distrust each other too much to combine against me. And who would share the gem with another?"

He poured himself wine with an unsteady hand.

"I am Skol the Butcher!" he boasted, "a prince in my own right! I am powerful and crafty beyond the knowledge of common men. For I am the most feared chieftain in all the Taurus, I who was dirt beneath men's feet,

the disowned and despised son of a renegade Persian noble and a Circassian slave-girl.

“Bah – these fools who plot against me – the Venetian, Kai Shah, Musa bin Daoud and Kadra Muhammad – over against them I play Nadir Tous, that polished cutthroat, and Kojar Mirza. The Persian and the Kurd hate me and they hate di Strozza, but they hate each other even more. And Shalmar Khor hates them all.”

“And what of Seosamh el Mekru?” Cormac could not twist his Norman-Celtic tongue to the Arabic of Joseph.

“Who knows what is in an Arab’s mind?” growled Skol. “But you may be certain he is a jackal for loot, like all his kind, and will watch which way the feather falls, to join the stronger side – and then betray the winners.

“But I care not!” the robber roared suddenly. “I am Skol the Butcher! Deep in the deeps of the Blood have I seen misty, monstrous shapes and read dark secrets! Aye – in my sleep I hear the whispers of that dead, half-human king from whom Naka the diver tore the jewel so long ago. Blood! That is a drink the ruby craves! Blood follows it; blood is drawn to it! Not the head of Cyrus did Queen Tomyris plunge into a vessel of warm blood as the legends say, but the gem she took from the dead king! He who wears it must quench its thirst or it will drink his own blood! Aye, the heart’s flow of kings and queens have gone into its crimson shadow!

“And I have quenched its thirst! There are secrets of Bab-el-Shaitan none knows but I – and Abdullah whose withered tongue can never speak of the sights he has looked upon, the shrieks his ears have heard in the blackness below the castle when midnight holds the mountains breathless. For I have broken into secret corridors, sealed up by the Arabs who rebuilt the hold, and unknown to the Turks who followed them.”

He checked himself as if he had said too much. But the crimson dreams began to weave again their pattern of insanity.

“You have wondered why you see no women here? Yet hundreds of fair girls have passed through the portals of Bab-el-Shaitan. Where are they now? Ha ha ha!” The giant’s sudden roar of ghastly laughter thundered in the room.

“Many went to quench the ruby’s thirst,” said Skol, reaching for the wine jug, “or to become the brides of the Dead, the concubines of ancient demons of the mountains and deserts, who take fair girls only in death throes. Some I or my warriors merely wearied of and flung to the vultures.”

Cormac sat, chin on mailed fist, his dark brows lowering in disgust.

"Ha!" laughed the robber. "You do not laugh – are you thin-skinned, lord Frank? I have heard you spoken of as a desperate man. Wait until you have ridden with me for a few moons! Not for nothing am I named the Butcher! I have built a pyramid of skulls in my day! I have severed the necks of old men and old women, I have dashed out the brains of babes, I have ripped up women, I have burned children alive and sat them by scores on pointed stakes! Pour me wine, Frank."

"Pour your own damned wine," growled Cormac, his lip writhing back dangerously.

"That had cost another man his head," said Skol, reaching for his goblet. "You are rude of speech to your host and the man you have ridden so far to serve. Take care – rouse me not." Again he laughed his horrible laughter.

"These walls have re-echoed to screams of direst agony!" His eyes began to burn with a reckless and maddened light. "With these hands have I disembowelled men, torn out the tongues of children and ripped out the eyeballs of girls – thus!"

With a shriek of crazed laughter his huge hand shot at Cormac's face. With an oath the Norman caught the giant's wrist and bones creaked in that iron grip. Twisting the arm viciously down and aside with a force that nearly tore it from its socket, Cormac flung Skol back on the divan.

"Save your whims for your slaves, you drunken fool," the Norman rasped.

Skol sprawled on the divan, grinning like an idiotic ogre and trying to work his fingers which Cormac's savage grasp had numbed. The Norman rose and strode from the chamber in fierce disgust; his last backward glance showed Skol fumbling with the wine jug, with one hand still grasping the Blood of Belshazzar, which cast a sinister light all over the room.

The door shut behind Cormac and the Nubian cast him a sidelong, suspicious glance. The Norman shouted impatiently for Jacob, and the Jew bobbed up suddenly and apprehensively. His face cleared when Cormac bruskly demanded to be shown his chamber. As he tramped along the bare, torch-lighted corridors, Cormac heard sounds of revelry still going on below. Knives would be going before morning, reflected Cormac, and some would not see the rising of the sun. Yet the noises were neither as loud nor

as varied as they had been when he left the banquet hall; no doubt many were already senseless from strong drink.

Jacob turned aside and opened a heavy door, his torch revealing a small cell-like room, bare of hangings, with a sort of bunk on one side; there was a single window, heavily barred, and but one door. The Jew thrust the torch into a niche of the wall.

“Was the lord Skol pleased with you, my lord?” he asked nervously.

Cormac cursed. “I rode over a hundred miles to join the most powerful raider in the Taurus, and I find only a wine-bibbing, drunken fool, fit only to howl bloody boasts and blasphemies to the roof.”

“Be careful, for God’s sake, sir,” Jacob shook from head to foot. “These walls have ears! The great prince has these strange moods, but he is a mighty fighter and a crafty man for all that. Do not judge him in his drunkenness. Did – did – did he speak aught of me?”

“Aye,” answered Cormac at random, a whimsical grim humor striking him. “He said you only served him in hopes of stealing his ruby some day.”

Jacob gasped as if Cormac had hit him in the belly and the sudden pallor of his face told the Norman his chance shot had gone home. The majordomo ducked out of the room like a scared rabbit and it was in somewhat better humor that his tormentor turned to retire.

Looking out the window, Cormac glanced down into the courtyard where the animals were kept, at the stables wherein he had seen that his great black stallion had been placed. Satisfied that the steed was well sheltered for the night, he lay down on the bunk in full armor, with his shield, helmet and sword beside him, as he was wont to sleep in strange holds. He had barred the door from within, but he put little trust in bolts and bars.

II

Cormac had been asleep less than an hour when a sudden sound brought him wide awake and alert. It was utterly dark in the chamber; even his keen eyes could make out nothing, but someone or something was moving on him in the darkness. He thought of the evil reputation of Bab-el-Shaitan and a momentary shiver shook him – not of fear but of superstitious revulsion.

Then his practical mind asserted itself. It was that fool Toghrul Khan who had slipped into his chamber to cleanse his strange nomadic honor by murdering the man who had been given priority over him. Cormac cautiously drew his legs about and lifted his body until he was sitting on the side of the bunk. At the rattle of his mail, the stealthy sounds ceased, but the Norman could visualize Toghrul Khan's slant eyes glittering snake-like in the dark. Doubtless he had already slit the throat of Jacob the Jew.

As quietly as possible, Cormac eased the heavy sword from its scabbard. Then as the sinister sounds recommenced, he tensed himself, made a swift estimate of location, and leaped like a huge tiger, smiting blindly and terribly in the dark. He had judged correctly. He felt the sword strike solidly, crunching through flesh and bone, and a body fell heavily in the darkness.

Feeling for flint and steel, he struck fire to tinder and lighted the torch, then turning to the crumpled shape in the center of the room, he halted in amazement. The man who lay there in a widening pool of crimson was tall, powerfully built and hairy as an ape – Kadra Muhammad. The Lur's scimitar was in his scabbard, but a wicked dagger lay by his right hand.

"He had no quarrel with me," growled Cormac, puzzled. "What – " He stopped again. The door was still bolted from within, but in what had been a blank wall to the casual gaze, a black opening gaped – a secret doorway through which Kadra Muhammad had come. Cormac closed it and with sudden purpose pulled his coif in place and donned his helmet. Then taking up his shield, he opened the door and strode forth into the torch-lighted corridor. All was silence, broken only by the tramp of his iron-clad feet on the bare flags. The sounds of revelry had ceased and a ghostly stillness hung over Bab-el-Shaitan.

In a few minutes he stood before the door of Skol Abdhur's chamber and saw there what he had half expected. The Nubian Abdullah lay before the

threshold, disembowelled, and his woolly head half severed from his body. Cormac thrust open the door; the candles still burned. On the floor, in the blood-soaked ruins of the torn divan lay the gashed and naked body of Skol Abdhur the Butcher. The corpse was slashed and hacked horribly, but it was evident to Cormac that Skol had died in drunken sleep with no chance to fight for his life. It was some obscure hysteria or frantic hatred that had led his slayer or slayers to so disfigure his dead body. His garments lay near him, ripped to shreds. Cormac smiled grimly, nodding.

"So the Blood of Belshazzar drank your life at last, Skol," said he.

Turning toward the doorway he again scanned the body of the Nubian.

"More than one slew these men," he muttered, "and the Nubian gave scathe to one, at least."

The black still gripped his great scimitar and the edge was nicked and blood-stained.

At that moment a quick rattle of steps sounded on the flags and the affrighted face of Jacob peered in at the door. His eyes flared wide and he opened his mouth to the widest extent to give vent to an ear-piercing screech.

"Shut up, you fool," snarled Cormac disgusted, but Jacob gibbered wildly.

"Spare my life, most noble lord! I will not tell anyone that you slew Skol – I swear – "

"Be quiet, Jew," growled Cormac. "I did not slay Skol and I will not harm you."

This somewhat reassured Jacob, whose eyes narrowed with sudden avarice.

"Have you found the gem?" he chattered, running into the chamber. "Swift, let us search for it and begone – I should not have shrieked but I feared the noble lord would slay me – yet perchance it was not heard – "

"It was heard," growled the Norman. "And here are the warriors."

The tramp of many hurried feet was heard and a second later the door was thronged with bearded faces. Cormac noted the men blinked and gaped like owls, more like men roused from deep sleep than drunken men. Bleary-eyed, they gripped their weapons and ogled, a ragged, bemused horde. Jacob shrank back, trying to flatten himself against the wall, while Cormac faced them, blood-stained sword still in his hand.

“Allah!” ejaculated a Kurd, rubbing his eyes. “The Frank and the Jew have murdered Skol!”

“A lie,” growled Cormac menacingly. “I know not who slew this drunkard.”

Tisolino di Strozza came into the chamber, followed by the other chiefs. Cormac saw Nadir Tous, Kojar Mirza, Shalmar Khor, Yussef el Mekru and Justus Zehor. Toghrul Khan, Kai Shah and Musa bin Daoud were nowhere in evidence, and where Kadra Muhammad was, the Norman well knew.

“The jewel!” exclaimed an Armenian excitedly. “Let us look for the gem!”

“Be quiet, fool,” snapped Nadir Tous, a light of baffled fury growing in his eyes. “Skol has been stripped; be sure who slew him took the gem.”

All eyes turned toward Cormac.

“Skol was a hard master,” said Tisolino. “Give us the jewel, lord Cormac, and you may go your way in peace.”

Cormac swore angrily; had not, he thought, even as he replied, the Venetian’s eyes widened when they first fell on him?

“I have not your cursed jewel; Skol was dead when I came to his room.”

“Aye,” jeered Kojar Mirza, “and blood still wet on your blade.” He pointed accusingly at the weapon in Cormac’s hand, whose blue steel, traced with Norse runes, was stained a dull red.

“That is the blood of Kadra Muhammad,” growled Cormac, “who stole into my cell to slay me and whose corpse now lies there.”

His eyes were fixed with fierce intensity on di Strozza’s face but the Venetian’s expression altered not a whit.

“I will go to the chamber and see if he speaks truth,” said di Strozza, and Nadir Tous smiled a deadly smile.

“You will remain here,” said the Persian, and his ruffians closed menacingly around the tall Venetian. “Go you, Selim.” And one of his men went grumbling. Di Strozza shot a swift glance of terrible hatred and suppressed wrath at Nadir Tous, then stood imperturbably; but Cormac knew that the Venetian was wild to escape from that room.

“There have been strange things done tonight in Bab-el-Shaitan,” growled Shalmar Khor. “Where are Kai Shah and the Syrian – and that pagan from Tartary? And who drugged the wine?”

“Aye!” exclaimed Nadir Tous, “who drugged the wine which sent us all into the sleep from which we but a few moments ago awakened? And how

is it that you, di Strozza, were awake when the rest of us slept?”

“I have told you, I drank the wine and fell asleep like the rest of you,” answered the Venetian coldly. “I awoke a few moments earlier, that is all, and was going to my chamber when the horde of you came along.”

“Mayhap,” answered Nadir Tous, “but we had to put a scimitar edge to your throat before you would come with us.”

“Why did you wish to come to Skol’s chamber anyway?” countered di Strozza.

“Why,” answered the Persian, “when we awoke and realized we had been drugged, Shalmar Khor suggested that we go to Skol’s chamber and see if he had flown with the jewel – ”

“You lie!” exclaimed the Circassian. “That was Kojar Mirza said that – ”

“Why this delay and argument?” cried Kojar Mirza. “We know this Frank was the last to be admitted to Skol this night. There is blood on his blade – we found him standing above the slain! Cut him down!”

And drawing his scimitar he stepped forward, his warriors surging in behind him. Cormac placed his back to the wall and braced his feet to meet the charge. But it did not come; the tense figure of the giant Norman-Gael was so fraught with brooding menace, the eyes glaring so terribly above the skull-adorned shield, that even the wild Kurd faltered and hesitated, though a score of men thronged the room and many more than that number swarmed in the corridor outside. And as he wavered the Persian Selim elbowed his way through the band, shouting: “The Frank spoke truth! Kadra Muhammad lies dead in the lord Cormac’s chamber!”

“That proves nothing,” said the Venetian quietly. “He might have slain Skol after he slew the Lur.”

An uneasy and bristling silence reigned for an instant. Cormac noted that now Skol lay dead, the different factions made no attempt to conceal their differences. Nadir Tous, Kojar Mirza and Shalmar Khor stood apart from each other and their followers bunched behind them in glaring, weapon-thumbing groups. Yussef el Mekru and Justus Zehor stood aside, looking undecided; only di Strozza seemed oblivious to this cleavage of the robber band.

The Venetian was about to say more, when another figure shouldered men aside and strode in. It was the Seljuk, Kai Shah, and Cormac noted that he

lacked his mail shirt and that his garments were different from those he had worn earlier in the night. More, his left arm was bandaged and bound close to his chest and his dark face was somewhat pale.

At the sight of him di Strozza's calm for the first time deserted him; he started violently.

"Where is Musa bin Daoud?" he exclaimed.

"Aye!" answered the Turk angrily. "Where is Musa bin Daoud?"

"I left him with you!" cried di Strozza fiercely, while the others gaped, not understanding this byplay.

"But you planned with him to elude me," accused the Seljuk.

"You are mad!" shouted di Strozza, losing his self-control entirely.

"Mad?" snarled the Turk. "I have been searching for the dog through the dark corridors. If you and he are acting in good faith, why did you not return to the chamber, when you went forth to meet Kadra Muhammad whom we heard coming along the corridor? When you came not back I stepped to the door to peer out for you, and when I turned back, Musa had darted through some secret opening like a rat – "

Di Strozza almost frothed at the mouth. "You fool!" he screamed, "keep silent!"

"I will see you in Gehennum and all our throats cut before I let you cozen me!" roared the Turk, ripping out his scimitar. "What have you done with Musa?"

"You fool of hell," raved di Strozza, "I have been in this chamber ever since I left you! You knew that Syrian dog would play us false if he got the opportunity and – "

And at that instant when the air was already supercharged with tension, a terrified slave rushed in at a blind, stumbling run, to fall gibbering at di Strozza's feet.

"The gods!" he howled. "The black gods! Aie! The cavern under the floors and the djinn in the rock!"

"What are you yammering about, dog?" roared the Venetian, knocking the slave to the floor with an open-handed blow.

"I found the forbidden door open," screeched the fellow. "A stair goes down – it leads into a fearful cavern with a terrible altar on which frown gigantic demons – and at the foot of the stairs – the lord Musa – "

"What!" di Strozza's eyes blazed and he shook the slave as a dog shakes a rat.

“Dead!” gasped the wretch between chattering teeth.

Cursing terribly, di Strozza knocked men aside in his rush to the door; with a vengeful howl Kai Shah pelted after him, slashing right and left to clear a way. Men gave back from his flashing blade, howling as the keen edge slit their skins. The Venetian and his erstwhile comrade ran down the corridor, di Strozza dragging the screaming slave after him, and the rest of the pack gave tongue in rage and bewilderment and took after them. Cormac swore in amazement and followed, determined to see the mad game through.

Down winding corridors di Strozza led the pack, down broad stairs, until he came to a huge iron door that now swung open. Here the horde hesitated.

“This is in truth the forbidden door,” muttered an Armenian. “The brand is on my back that Skol put there merely because I lingered too long before it once.”

“Aye,” agreed a Persian. “It leads into places once sealed up by the Arabs long ago. None but Skol ever passed through that door – he and the Nubian and the captives who came not forth. It is a haunt of devils.”

Di Strozza snarled in disgust and strode through the doorway. He had snatched a torch as he ran and he held this high in one hand. Broad steps showed, leading downward, and cut out of solid rock. They were on the lower floor of the castle; these steps led into the bowels of the earth. As di Strozza strode down, dragging the howling, naked slave, the high-held torch lighting the black stone steps and casting long shadows into the darkness before them, the Venetian looked like a demon dragging a soul into Hell.

Kai Shah was close behind him with his drawn scimitar, with Nadir Tous and Kojar Mirza crowding him close. The ragged crew had, with unaccustomed courtesy, drawn back to let the lord Cormac through and now they followed, uneasily and casting apprehensive glances to all sides.

Many carried torches, and as their light flowed into the depths below a medley of affrighted yells went up. From the darkness huge evil eyes glimmered and titanic shapes loomed vaguely in the gloom. The mob wavered, ready to stampede, but di Strozza strode stolidly downward and the pack called on Allah and followed. Now the light showed a huge cavern in the center of which stood a black and utterly abhorrent altar, hideously stained, and flanked with grinning skulls laid out in strangely systematic

lines. The horrific figures were disclosed to be huge images, carved from the solid rock of the cavern walls, strange, bestial, gigantic gods, whose huge eyes of some glassy substance caught the torchlight.

The Celtic blood in Cormac sent a shiver down his spine. Alexander built the foundations of this fortress? Bah – no Grecian ever carved such gods as these. No; an aura of unspeakable antiquity brooded over this grim cavern, as if the forbidden door were a mystic threshold over which the adventurer stepped into an elder world. No wonder mad dreams were here bred in the frenzied brain of Skol Abdhur. These gods were grim vestiges of an older, darker race than Roman or Hellene – a people long faded into the gloom of antiquity. Phrygians – Lydians – Hittites? Or some still more ancient, more abysmal people?

The age of Alexander was as dawn before these ancient figures, yet doubtless he bowed to these gods, as he bowed to many gods before his maddened brain made himself a deity.

At the foot of the stairs lay a crumpled shape – Musa bin Daoud. His face was twisted in horror. A medley of shouts went up: “The djinn have taken the Syrian! Let us begone! This is an evil place!”

“Be silent, you fools!” roared Nadir Tous. “A mortal blade slew Musa – see, he has been slashed through the breast and his bones are broken. See how he lies. Someone slew him and flung him down the stairs – ”

The Persian’s voice trailed off, as his gaze followed his own pointing fingers. Musa’s left arm was outstretched and his fingers had been hacked away.

“He held something in that hand,” whispered Nadir Tous. “So hard he gripped it that his slayer was forced to cut off his fingers to obtain it – ”

Men thrust torches into niches on the wall and crowded nearer, their superstitious fears forgotten.

“Aye!” exclaimed Cormac, having pieced together some of the bits of the puzzle in his mind. “It was the gem! Musa and Kai Shah and di Strozza killed Skol, and Musa had the gem. There was blood on Abdullah’s sword and Kai Shah has a broken arm – shattered by the sweep of the Nubian’s great scimitar. Whoever slew Musa has the gem.”

Di Strozza screamed like a wounded panther. He shook the wretched slave.

“Dog, have you the gem?”

The slave began a frenzied denial but his voice broke in a ghastly gurgle as di Strozza, in a very fit of madness, jerked his sword edge across the wretch’s throat and flung the blood-spurting body from him. The Venetian whirled on Kai Shah.

“You slew Musa!” he screamed. “He was with you last! You have the gem!”

“You lie!” exclaimed the Turk, his dark face an ashy pallor. “You slew him yourself – ”

His words ended in a gasp as di Strozza, foaming at the mouth and all sanity gone from his eyes, ran his sword straight through the Turk’s body. Kai Shah swayed like a sapling in the wind; then as di Strozza withdrew the blade, the Seljuk hacked through the Venetian’s temple, and as Kai Shah reeled, dying on his feet but clinging to life with the tenacity of the Turk, Nadir Tous leaped like a panther and beneath his flashing scimitar Kai Shah dropped dead across the dead Venetian.

Forgetting all else in his lust for the gem, Nadir Tous bent over his victim, tearing at his garments – bent further as if in a deep salaam and sank down on the dead men, his own skull split to the teeth by Kojar Mirza’s stroke. The Kurd bent to search the Turk, but straightened swiftly to meet the attack of Shalmar Khor. In an instant the scene was one of ravening madness, where men hacked and slew and died blindly. The flickering torches lit the scene, and Cormac, backing away toward the stairs, swore amazedly. He had seen men go mad before, but this exceeded anything he had ever witnessed.

Kojar Mirza slew Selim and wounded a Circassian, but Shalmar Khor slashed through his arm-muscles, Justus Zehor ran in and stabbed the Kurd in the ribs, and Kojar Mirza went down, snapping like a dying wolf, to be hacked to pieces.

Justus Zehor and Yussef el Mekru seemed to have taken sides at last; the Georgian had thrown in his lot with Shalmar Khor, while the Arab rallied to him the Kurds and Turks. But besides these loosely knit bands of rivals, various warriors, mainly the Persians of Nadir Tous, raged through the strife, foaming at the mouth and striking all impartially. In an instant a dozen men were down, dying and trampled by the living. Justus Zehor fought with a long knife in each hand and he wrought red havoc before he sank, skull cleft, throat slashed and belly ripped up.

Even while they fought, the warriors had managed to tear to shreds the clothing of Kai Shah and di Strozza. Finding naught there, they howled like wolves and fell to their deadly work with new frenzy. A madness was on them; each time a man fell, others seized him, ripping his garments apart in search for the gem, slashing at each other as they did so.

Cormac saw Jacob trying to steal to the stairs, and even as the Norman decided to withdraw himself, a thought came to the brain of Yussef el Mekru. Arab-like, the Yemenite had fought more coolly than the others, and perhaps he had, even in the frenzy of combat, decided on his own interests. Possibly, seeing that all the leaders were down except Shalmar Khor, he decided it would be best to reunite the band, if possible, and it could be best done by directing their attention against a common foe. Perhaps he honestly thought that since the gem had not been found, Cormac had it. At any rate, the Sheikh suddenly tore away and pointing a lean arm toward the giant figure at the foot of the stairs, screamed: “*Allahu akbar!* There stands the thief! Slay the Nazarene!”

It was good Moslem psychology. There was an instant of bewildered pause in the battle, then a bloodthirsty howl went up and from a tangled battle of rival factions, the brawl became instantly a charge of a solid compact body that rushed wild-eyed on Cormac howling: “Slay the Caphar!”

Cormac snarled in disgusted irritation. He should have anticipated that. No time to escape now; he braced himself and met the charge. A Kurd, rushing

in headlong, was impaled on the Norman's long blade, and a giant Circassian, hurling his full weight on the kite-shaped shield, rebounded as from an iron tower. Cormac thundered his battle cry, "*Cloigeand abu*[*]," in a deep-toned roar that drowned the howls of the Moslems; he freed his blade and swung the heavy weapon in a crashing arc. Swords shivered to singing sparks and the warriors gave back. They plunged on again as Yussef el Mekru lashed them with burning words. A big Armenian broke his sword on Cormac's helmet and went down with his skull split. A Turk slashed at the Norman's face and howled as his wrist was caught on the Norse sword, and the hand flew from it.

Cormac's defense was his armor, the unshakable immovability of his stance, and his crashing blows. Head bent, eyes glaring above the rim of his shield, he made scant effort to parry or avoid blows. He took them on his helmet or his shield and struck back with thunderous power. Now Shalmar Khor smote full on his helmet with every ounce of his great rangy body behind the blow, and the scimitar bit through the steel cap, notching on the coif links beneath. It was a blow that might have felled an ox, yet Cormac, though half stunned, stood like a man of iron and struck back with all the power of arm and shoulders. The Circassian flung up his round buckler but it availed not. Cormac's heavy sword sheared through the buckler, severed the arm that held it and crashed full on the Circassian's helmet, shattering both steel cap and the skull beneath.

But fired by fanatical fury as well as greed, the Moslems pressed in. They got behind him. Cormac staggered as a heavy weight landed full on his shoulders. A Kurd had stolen up the stairs and leaped from them full on to the Frank's back. Now he clung like an ape, slavering curses and hacking wildly at Cormac's neck with his long knife.

The Norman's sword was wedged deep in a split breastbone and he struggled fiercely to free it. His hood was saving him so far from the knife strokes of the man on his back, but men were hacking at him from all sides and Yussef el Mekru, foam on his beard, was rushing upon him. Cormac drove his shield upward, catching a frothing Moslem under the chin with the rim and shattering his jawbone, and almost at the same instant the Norman bent his helmeted head forward and jerked it back with all the strength of his mighty neck, and the back of his helmet crushed the face of the Kurd on his back. Cormac felt the clutching arms relax; his sword was free, but a Lur was clinging to his right arm – they hemmed him in so he could not step back, and Yussef el Mekru was hacking at his face and throat. He set his teeth and lifted his sword-arm, swinging the clinging Lur clear of the floor. Yussef's scimitar rasped on his bent helmet – his hauberk – his coif links – the Arab's swordplay was like the flickering of light and in a moment it was inevitable that the flaming blade would sink home. And still the Lur clung, ape-like, to Cormac's mighty arm.

Something whispered across the Norman's shoulder and thudded solidly. Yussef el Mekru gasped and swayed, clawing at the thick shaft that protruded from his heavy beard. Blood burst from his parted lips and he fell

dying. The man clinging to Cormac's arm jerked convulsively and fell away. The press slackened. Cormac, panting, stepped back and gained the stairs. A glance upward showed him Toghrul Khan standing on the landing bending a heavy bow. The Norman hesitated; at that range the Mongol could drive a shaft through his mail.

"Haste, *bogatyr*," came the nomad's gutturals. "Up the stairs!"

At that instant Jacob started running fleetly for the darkness beyond the flickering torches; three steps he took before the bow twanged. The Jew screamed and went down as though struck by a giant's hand; the shaft had struck between his fat shoulders and gone clear through him.

Cormac was backing warily up the stairs, facing his foes who clustered at the foot of the steps, dazed and uncertain. Toghrul Khan crouched on the landing, beady eyes a-glitter, shaft on string, and men hesitated. But one dared – a tall Turkoman with the eyes of a mad dog. Whether greed for the gem he thought Cormac carried, or fanatical hate sent him leaping into the teeth of sword and arrow, he sprang howling up the stairs, lifting high a heavy iron-braced shield. Toghrul Khan loosed, but the shaft glanced from the metal work, and Cormac, bracing his legs again, struck downward with all his power. Sparks flashed as the down-crashing sword shattered the shield and dashed the Turkoman headlong to lie stunned at the foot of the stairs.

Then as the warriors fingered their weapons undecidedly, Cormac gained the landing, and Norman and Mongol backed together out of the door which Toghrul Khan slammed behind them. A wild medley of wolfish yells burst out from below and the Mongol, slamming a heavy bolt in place, growled: "Swiftly, *bogatyr*! It will be some minutes before those dog-brothers can batter down the door. Let us begone!"

He led the way at a swift run along a corridor, through a series of chambers, and flung open a barred door. Cormac saw that they had come into the courtyard, flooded now by the gray light of dawn. A man stood near, holding two horses – the great black stallion of Cormac and the Mongol's wiry roan. Leaning close Cormac saw that the man's face was bandaged so that only one eye showed.

"Haste," Toghrul Khan was urging. "The slave saddled my mount, but yours he could not saddle because of the savagery of the beast. The serf is to go with us."

Cormac made haste to comply; then swinging into the saddle he gave the fellow a hand and the slave sprang up behind him. The strangely assorted companions thundered across the courtyard just as raging figures burst through the doorway through which they had come.

“No sentries at the gates this night,” grunted the Mongol.

They pulled up at the wide gates and the slave sprang down to open them. He swung the portals wide, took a single step toward the black stallion and went down, dead before he struck the ground. A crossbow bolt had shattered his skull, and Cormac, wheeling with a curse, saw a Moslem kneeling on one of the bastions, aiming his weapon. Even as he looked, Toghrul Khan rose in his stirrups, drew a shaft to the head and loosed. The Moslem dropped his arbalest and pitched headlong from the battlement.

With a fierce yell the Mongol wheeled away and charged through the gates, Cormac close at his heels. Behind them sounded a wild and wolfish babel as the warriors rushed about the courtyard, seeking to find and saddle mounts.

III

“Look!” The companions had covered some miles of wild gorges and treacherous slopes, without hearing any sound of pursuit. Toghrul Khan pointed back. The sun had risen in the east, but behind them a red glow rivaled the sun.

“The Gate of Erlik burns,” said the Mongol. “They will not hunt us, those dog-brothers. They stopped to loot the castle and fight one another; some fool has set the hold on fire.”

“There is much I do not understand,” said Cormac slowly. “Let us sift truth from lies. That di Strozza, Kai Shah and Musa killed Skol is evident, also that they sent Kadra Muhammad to slay me – why, I know not. But I do not understand what Kai Shah meant by saying that they heard Kadra Muhammad coming down the corridor, and that di Strozza went forth to meet him, for surely at that moment Kadra Muhammad lay dead on my chamber floor. And I believe that both Kai Shah and the Venetian spoke truth when they denied slaying Musa.”

“Aye,” acknowledged the Mongol. “Harken, lord Frank: scarcely had you gone up to Skol’s chamber last night, when Musa the scribe left the banquet hall and soon returned with slaves who bore a great bowl of spiced wine – prepared in the Syrian way, said the scribe, and the steaming scent of it was pleasant.

“But I noted that neither he nor Kadra Muhammad drank of it, and when Kai Shah and di Strozza plunged in their goblets, they only pretended to drink. So when I raised my goblet to my lips, I sniffed long and secretly and smelled therein a very rare drug – aye, one I had thought was known only to the magicians of Cathay. It makes deep sleep and Musa must have obtained a small quantity in some raid on a caravan from the East. So I did not drink of the wine, but all the others drank saving those I have mentioned, and soon men began to grow drowsy, though the drug acted slowly, being weak in that it was distributed among so many.

“Soon I went to my chamber which a slave showed me, and squatting on my bunk, devised a plan of vengeance in my mind, for because that dog of a Jew put shame upon me before the lords, hot anger burned in my heart so that I could not sleep. Soon I heard one staggering past my door as a drunkard staggers, but this one whined like a dog in pain. I went forth and

found a slave whose eye, he said, his master had torn out. I have some knowledge of wounds, so I cleansed and bandaged his empty socket, easing his pain, for which he would have kissed my feet.

“Then I bethought me of the insult which had been put upon me, and desired the slave to show me where slept the fat hog, Jacob. He did so, and marking the chamber in my mind, I turned again and went with the slave into the courtyard where the beasts were kept. None hindered us, for all were in the feasting-hall and their din was growing lesser swiftly. In the stables I found four swift horses, ready saddled – the mounts of di Strozza and his comrades. And the slave told me, furthermore, that there were no guards at the gates that night – di Strozza had bidden all to feast in the great hall. So I bade the slave saddle my steed and have it ready, and also your black stallion which I coveted.

“Then I returned into the castle and heard no sound; all those who had drunk of the wine slept in the sleep of the drug. I mounted to the upper corridors, even to Jacob’s chamber, but when I entered to slit his fat throat, he was not sleeping there. I think he was guzzling wine with the slaves in some lower part of the castle.

“I went along the corridors searching for him, and suddenly saw ahead of me a chamber door partly open, through which shone light, and I heard the voice of the Venetian speak: ‘Kadra Muhammad is approaching; I will bid him hasten.’

“I did not desire to meet these men, so I turned quickly down a side corridor, hearing di Strozza call the name of Kadra Muhammad softly and as if puzzled. Then he came swiftly down the corridor, as if to see whose footfalls it was he heard, and I went hurriedly before him, crossing the landing of a wide stair which led up from the feasting-hall, and entered another corridor where I halted in the shadows and watched.

“Di Strozza came to the landing and paused, like a man bewildered, and at that moment an outcry went up from below. The Venetian turned to escape but the waking drunkards had seen him. Just as I had thought, the drug was too weak to keep them sleeping long, and now they realized they had been drugged and stormed bewilderedly up the stairs and laid hold on di Strozza, accusing him of many things and making him accompany them to Skol’s chamber. Me they did not spy.

“Still seeking Jacob, I went swiftly down the corridor at random and coming onto a narrow stairway, came at last to the ground floor and a dark

tunnel-like corridor which ran past a most strange door. And then sounded quick footsteps and as I drew back in the shadows, there came one in panting haste – the Syrian Musa, who gripped a scimitar in his right hand and something hidden in his left.

"He fumbled with the door until it opened; then lifting his head, he saw me and crying out wildly he slashed at me with his scimitar. Erlik! I had no quarrel with the man, but he was as one maddened by fear. I struck with the naked steel, and he, being close to the landing inside the door, pitched headlong down the stairs.

"Then I was desirous of learning what he held so tightly in his left hand, so I followed him down the stairs. Erlik! That was an evil place, dark and full of glaring eyes and strange shadows. The hair on my head stood up but I gripped my steel, calling on the Lords of Darkness and the high places. Musa's dead hand still gripped what he held so firmly that I was forced to cut off the fingers. Then I went back up the stairs and out the same way by which we later escaped from the castle, and found the slave ready with my mount, but unable to saddle yours.

"I was loth to depart without avenging my insult, and as I lingered I heard the clash of steel within the hold. And I stole back and came to the forbidden stair again while the fighting was fiercest below. All were assailing you, and though my heart was hot against you, because you had been given preference over me, I warmed to your valor. Aye, you are a hero, *bogatyr*!"

"Then it was thus, apparently," mused the Frank, "di Strozza and his comrades had it well planned out – they drugged the wine, called the guards from the walls, and had their horses ready for swift flight. As I had not drunk the drugged wine, they sent the Lur to slay me. The other three killed Skol and in the fight Kai Shah was wounded – Musa took the gem doubtless because neither Kai Shah nor the Venetian would trust it to the other.

"After the murder, they must have retired into a chamber to bandage Kai Shah's arm, and while there they heard you coming along the corridor and thought it the Lur. Then when di Strozza followed he was seized by the waking bandits, as you say – no wonder he was wild to be gone from Skol's chamber! And meanwhile Musa gave Kai Shah the slip somehow, meaning to have the gem for himself. But what of the gem?"

“Look!” the nomad held out his hand in which a sinister crimson glow throbbed and pulsed like a living thing in the early sun.

“The Blood of Belshazzar,” said Toghrul Khan. “Greed for this slew Skol and fear born of this evil thing slew Musa; for, escaping from his comrades, he thought the hand of all men against him and attacked me, when he could have gone on unmolested. Did he think to remain hidden in the cavern until he could slip away, or does some tunnel admit to outer air?

“Well, this red stone is evil – one can not eat it or drink it or clothe himself with it, or use it as a weapon, yet many men have died for it. Look – I will cast it away.” The Mongol turned to fling the gem over the verge of the dizzy precipice past which they were riding. Cormac caught his arm.

“Nay – if you do not want it, let me have it.”

“Willingly,” but the Mongol frowned. “My brother would wear the gaud?”

Cormac laughed shortly and Toghrul Khan smiled.

“I understand; you will buy favor from your sultan.”

“Bah!” Cormac growled, “I buy favor with my sword. No.” He grinned, well pleased. “This trinket will pay the ransom of Sir Rupert de Vaile to the chief who now holds him captive.”

* Gaelic: “The skull to victory.”

Red Blades of Black Cathay

Trumpets die in the loud parade,
The gray mist drinks the spears;
Banners of glory sink and fade
In the dust of a thousand years.
Singers of pride the silence stills,
The ghost of empire goes,
But a song still lives in the ancient hills,
And the scent of a vanished rose.
Ride with us on a dim, lost road
To the dawn of a distant day,
When swords were bare for a guerdon rare –
The Flower of Black Cathay.

I

The singing of the swords was a deathly clamor in the brain of Godric de Villehard. Blood and sweat veiled his eyes and in the instant of blindness he felt a keen point pierce a joint of his hauberk and sting deep into his ribs. Smiting blindly, he felt the jarring impact that meant his sword had gone home, and snatching an instant's grace, he flung back his vizor and wiped the redness from his eyes. A single glance only was allowed him: in that glance he had a fleeting glimpse of huge, wild black mountain; of a clump of mail-clad warriors, ringed by a howling horde of human wolves; and in the center of that clump, a slim, silk-clad shape standing between a dying horse and a dying swordsman. Then the wolfish figures surged in on all sides, hacking like madmen.

"Christ and the Cross!" the old Crusading shout rose in a ghastly croak from Godric's parched lips. As if far away he heard voices gaspingly repeat the words. Curved sabers rained on shield and helmet. Godric's eyes blurred to the sweep of frenzied dark faces with bristling, foam-flecked beards. He fought like a man in a dream. A great weariness fettered his limbs. Somewhere – long ago it seemed – a heavy ax, shattering on his helm, had bitten through an old dent to rend the scalp beneath. He heaved his curiously weighted arm above his head and split a bearded face to the chin.

"*En avant*, Montferrat!" We must hack through and shatter the gates, thought the dazed brain of Godric; we can not long stand this press, but once within the city – no – these walls were not the walls of Constantinople: he was mad; he dreamed – these towering heights were the crags of a lost and nameless land and Montferrat and the Crusade lay lost in leagues and years.

Godric's steed reared and pitched headlong, throwing his rider with a clash of armor. Under the lashing hoofs and the shower of blades, the knight struggled clear and rose, without his shield, blood starting from every joint in his armor. He reeled, bracing himself; he fought not these foes alone, but the long grinding days behind – the days and days of hard riding and ceaseless fighting.

Godric thrust upward and a man died. A scimitar shivered on his crest, and the wielder, torn from his saddle by a hand that was still iron, spilled his entrails at Godric's feet. The rest reined in around howling, seeking to

overthrow the giant Frank by sheer weight of numbers. Somewhere in the hellish din a woman's scream knifed the air. A clatter of hoofs burst like a sudden whirlwind and the press was cleared. Through a red mist the dulling eyes of the knight saw the wolfish, skin-clad assailants swept away by a sudden flood of mailed riders who hacked them down and trampled them under.

Then men were dismounting around him, men whose gaudy silvered armor, high fur kaftans and two-handed scimitars he saw as in a dream. One with thin drooping mustaches adorning his dark face spoke to him in a Turkish tongue the knight could faintly understand, but the burden of the words was unintelligible. He shook his head.

"I can not linger," Godric said, speaking slowly and with growing difficulty, "De Montferrat awaits my report and I must – ride – East – to – find – the – kingdom – of – Prester – John – bid – my – men – mount – "

His voice trailed off. He saw his men; they lay about in a silent, sword-gashed cluster, dead as they had lived – facing the foe. Suddenly the strength flowed from Godric de Villehard in a great surge and he fell as a blasted tree falls. The red mist closed about him, but ere it engulfed him utterly, he saw bending near him two great dark eyes, strangely soft and luminous, that filled him with formless yearning; in a world grown dim and unreal they were the one tangible reality and this vision he took with him into a nightmare realm of shadows.

Godric's return to waking life was as abrupt as his departure. He opened his eyes to a scene of exotic splendor. He was lying on a silken couch near a wide window whose sill and bars were of chased gold. Silken cushions littered the marble floor and the walls were of mosaics where they were not worked in designs of gems and silver, and were hung with heavy tapestries of silk, satin and cloth-of-gold. The ceiling was a single lofty dome of lapis lazuli from which was suspended on golden chains a censer that shed a faint alluring scent over all. Through the window a faint breeze wafted scents of spices, roses and jasmine, and beyond Godric could see the clear blue of the Asian skies.

He tried to rise and fell back with a startled exclamation. Whence this strange weakness? The hand he lifted to his gaze was thinner than should be, and its bronze was faded. He gazed in perplexity at the silken, almost

feminine garments which clothed him, and then he remembered – the long wandering, the battle, the slaughter of his men-at-arms. His heart turned sick within him as he remembered the staunch faithfulness of the men he had led to the shambles.

A tall, thin yellow man with a kindly face entered and smiled to see that he was awake and in his right mind. He spoke to the knight in several languages unknown to Godric, then used one easy to understand – a rough Turkish dialect much akin to the bastard tongue used by the Franks in their contacts with the Turanian peoples.

“What place is this?” asked Godric. “How long have I lain here?”

“You have lain here many days,” answered the other. “I am You-tai, the emperor’s man-of-healing. This is the heaven-born empire of Black Cathay. The princess Yulita has attended you with her own hands while you lay raving in delirium. Only through her care and your own marvelous natural strength have you survived. When she told the emperor how you with your small band recklessly charged and delivered her from the hands of the Hian bandits who had slain her guard and taken her prisoner, the heavenly one gave command that naught be spared to preserve you. Who are you, most noble lord? While you raved you spoke of many unknown peoples, places and battles and your appearance is such as to show that you come from afar.”

Godric laughed, and bitterness was in his laughter.

“Aye,” quoth he, “I have ridden far; the deserts have parched my lips and the mountains have wearied my feet. I have seen Trebizond in my wanderings, and Teheran and Bokhara and Samarcand. I have looked on the waters of the Black Sea and the Sea of Ravens. From Constantinople far to the west I set forth more than a year agone, riding eastward. I am a knight of Normandy, Sir Godric de Villehard.”

“I have heard of some of the places you name,” answered You-tai, “but many of them are unknown to me. Eat now, and rest. In time the princess Yulita will come to you.”

So Godric ate the curiously spiced rice, the dates and candied meats, and drank the colorless rice wine brought him by a flat-faced girl slave who wore golden bangles on her ankles, and soon slept, and sleeping, his unquenchable vitality began to assert itself.

When he awoke from that long sleep he felt refreshed and stronger, and soon the pearl-inlaid doors opened and a slight, silk-clad figure entered.

Godric's heart suddenly pounded as he again felt the soft, tender gaze of those great dark eyes upon him. He drew himself together with an effort; was he a boy to tremble before a pair of eyes, even though they adorned the face of a princess?

Long used was he to the veiled women of the Moslems, and Yulita's creamy cheeks with her full ruby lips were like an oasis in the waste.

"I am Yulita," the voice was soft, vibrant and musical as the silvery tinkle of the fountain in the court outside. "I wish to thank you. You are brave as Rustum. When the Hians rushed from the defiles and cut down my guard, I was afraid. You answered my screams as unexpectedly and boldly as a hero sent down from paradise. I am sorry your brave men died."

"And I likewise," the Norman answered with the bluntness of his race, "but it was their trade: they would not have had it otherwise and they could not have died in a better cause."

"But why did you risk your life to aid me, who am not of your race and whom you never saw before?" she pursued.

Godric might have answered as would nine out of any ten knights in his position – with the repeating of the vow of chivalry, to protect all weaker things. But being Godric de Villehard, he shrugged his shoulders. "God knows. I should have known it was death to us all to charge that horde. I have seen too much rapine and outrage since I turned my face east to have thus thrown away my men and expedition in the ordinary course of events. Perhaps I saw at a glance you were of regal blood and followed the knight's natural instinct to rush to the aid of royalty."

She bowed her head. "I am sorry."

"I am not," he growled. "My men would have died anyhow today or tomorrow – now they are at rest. We have ridden through hell for more than a year. Now they are beyond the sun's heat and the Turk's saber."

She rested her chin on her hands and her elbows on her knees, leaning forward to gaze deep into his eyes. His senses swam momentarily. Her eyes traversed his mighty frame to return to his face. Thin-lipped, with cold gray eyes, Godric de Villehard's sun-darkened, clean-shaven face inspired trust and respect in men but there was little in his appearance to stir the heart of a woman. The Norman was not past thirty, but his hard life had carved his face into inflexible lines. Rather than the beauty that appeals to women, there was in his features the lean strength of the hunting wolf. The forehead was high and broad, the brow of a thinker, and once the mouth had been

kindly, the eyes those of a dreamer. But now his eyes were bitter and his whole appearance that of a man with whom life has dealt hardly – who has ceased to look for mercy or to give it.

“Tell me, Sir Godric,” said Yulita, “whence come you and why have you ridden so far with so few men?”

“It’s a long tale,” he answered. “It had its birth in a land half-way across the world. I was a boy and full of high ideals of chivalry and knighthood – and I hated that Saxon-French pig, King John. A wine-bibber named Fulk of Neuilly began ranting and screaming death and damnation because the Holy Land was still in the possession of the Paynim. He howled until he stirred the blood of such young fools as myself, and the barons began recruiting men – forgetting how the other Crusades had ended.

“Walter de Brienne and that black-faced cutthroat Simon de Montfort fired us young Normans with promises of salvation and Turkish loot, and we set forth. Boniface and Baldwin were our leaders and they plotted against each other all the way to Venice.

“There the mercenary Venetians refused us ships and it sickened my very entrails to see our chiefs go down on their knees to those merchant swine. They promised us ships at last but they set such a high price we could not pay. None of us had any money, else we had never started on that mad venture. We wrenched the jewels from our hilts and the gold from our buckles and raised part of the money, bargaining to take various cities from the Greeks and give them over to Venice for the rest of the price. The Pope – Innocent III – raged, but we went our ways and quenched our swords in Christian blood instead of Paynim.

“Spalato we took, and Ragusa, Sebenico and Zara. The Venetians got the cities and we got the glory.” Here Godric laughed harshly. A quick glance told him the girl was sitting spellbound, eyes aglow. Somehow he felt ashamed.

“Well,” he continued, “young Alexius who had been driven from Constantinople persuaded us that it would be doing God’s work to put old Angelus back on the throne, so we fared forth.

“We took Constantinople with no great difficulty, but only a scant time had elapsed before the maddened people strangled old Angelus and we were forced to take the city again. This time we sacked it and split the empire up. De Montfort had long returned to England and I fought under Boniface of Montferrat, who was made King of Macedonia. One day he

called me to him, and said he: ‘Godric, the Turkomans harry the caravans and the trade of the East dries up because of constant war. Take a hundred men-at-arms and find me this kingdom of Prester John. He too is a Christian and we may establish a route of trade between us, guarded by both of us, and thus safeguard the caravans.’

“Thus he spoke, being a natural-born liar and unable to tell the truth on a wager. I saw through his design and understood his wish for me to conquer this fabulous kingdom for him.

“ ‘Only a hundred men?’ quoth I.

“ ‘I can not spare you more,’ said he, ‘lest Baldwin and Dandolo and the Count of Blois come in and cut my throat. These are enow. Gain ye to Prester John and abide with him awhile – aid him in his wars for a space, then send riders to report your progress to me. Mayhap then I can send you more men.’ And his eyelids drooped in a way I knew.

“ ‘But where lies this kingdom?’ said I.

“ ‘Easy enough,’ said he; ‘to the east – any fool can find it if he fares far enough.’

“So,” Godric’s face darkened, “I rode east with a hundred heavily armed horsemen – the pick of the Norman warriors. By Satan, we hacked our way through! Once past Trebizond we had to fight almost every mile. We were assailed by Turks, Persians and Kirghiz, as well as by our natural foes of heat, thirst and hunger. A hundred men – there were less than a score with me when I heard your screams and rode out of the defiles. Their bodies lie scattered from the hills of Black Cathay to the shores of the Black Sea. Arrows, spears, swords, all took their toll, but still I forged eastward.”

“And all for your liege lord!” cried Yulita, her eyes sparkling, as she clasped her hands. “Oh, it is like the tales of honor and chivalry; of Iran and those You-tai has told me of the heroes of ancient Cathay. It makes my blood burn! You too are a hero such as all men were once in the days of our ancestors, with your courage and loyalty!”

The sting of his healing wounds bit into Godric.

“Loyalty?” he snarled. “To that devious-minded assassin, Montferrat? Bah! Do you think I intended giving up my life to carve out a kingdom for him? He had naught to lose and all to gain. He gave me a handful of men, expecting to receive the rewards of what I did. If I failed, he was still winner, for he would be rid of a turbulent vassal. The kingdom of Prester John is a dream and a fantasy. I have followed a will-o’-the-wisp for a

thousand miles. A dream that receded farther and farther into the mazes of the East, leading me to my doom."

"And had you found it, what then?" asked the girl, grown suddenly quiet.

Godric shrugged his shoulders. It was not the Norman way to flaunt secret ambitions to any chance-met man or woman, but after all, he owed his life to this girl. She had paid her debt to him and there was something in her eyes.…

"Had I found Prester John's kingdom," said Godric, "I had made shift to conquer it for myself."

"Look," Yulita took Godric's arm and pointed out a gold-barred window, whose sheer silken curtains, blowing inward, disclosed the rugged peaks of distant mountains, shouldering against the blazing blue of the skies.

"Beyond those mountains lies the kingdom of him you call Prester John."

Godric's eyes gleamed suddenly with the conquering spirit of the true Norman – the born empire-maker, whose race had carved out kingdoms with their swords in every land of the West and Near East.

"And does he dwell in purple-domed palaces of gold and glittering gems?" he asked eagerly. "Do, as I have heard, learned philosophers and magi sit at either hand, doing wonders with stars and suns and ghosts of the mighty dead? Does his city loom among the clouds with golden spires thrusting among the stars? And does the deathless monarch, who learned at the feet of our fair Lord Christ, sit on an ivory throne in a room whose walls are carved of one great sapphire dispensing justice?"

She shook her head.

"Prester John – Wang Khan we name him – is very old, but he is not deathless nor has he ever been beyond the confines of his own kingdom. His people are the Keraits – Krits – Christians; they dwell in cities, true, but the houses are mud huts and goatskin tents, and the palace of Wang Khan is as a hut itself compared to this palace."

Godric fell back and his eyes went dull.

"My dream is vanished," he muttered. "You should have let me die."

"Dream again, man," she answered; "only dream something more attainable."

Shaking his head, he looked into her eyes.

"Dreams of empire have haunted my life," said he, "yet even now the shadow of a dream lingers in my soul, ten times less attainable than the kingdom of Prester John."

II

Scrawled screens and secret gardens
And insect-laden skies –
Where fiery plains stretch on and on
To the purple country of Prester John
And the walls of Paradise.

– Chesterton

The days passed and slowly the giant frame of the Norman knight regained its accustomed vigor. In those days he sat in the chamber with the lapis lazuli dome, or walked in the outer courts where fountains tinkled musically beneath the shade of cherry trees, and soft petals fell in a colorful rain about him. The battle-scarred warrior felt strangely out of place in this setting of exotic luxury but was inclined to rest there and lull the restlessness of his nature for a time. He saw nothing of the city, Jahadur, for the walls about the courts were high, and he presently understood that he was practically a prisoner. He saw only Yulita, the slaves and You-tai. With the thin yellow man he talked much. You-tai was a Cathayan – a member of the race who lived in Greater Cathay, some distance to the south. This empire, Godric soon realized, had given rise to many of the tales of Prester John; it was an ancient, mighty but now loosely knit empire, divided into three kingdoms – the Khitai, the Chin and the Sung. You-tai was learned beyond any man Godric had ever known and he spoke freely.

"The emperor inquires often after your health," said he, "but I tell you frankly, it were best that you not be presented to him for a time at least. Since your great battle with the Hian bandits, you have captured the fancy of the soldiers, especially old Roogla, the general who loves the princess like his own since he bore her as a babe on his saddle-bow from the ruins of Than when the Naimans raided over the border. Chamu Khan fears anyone the army loves. He fears you might be a spy. He fears most things, does the emperor, even his niece, the princess Yulita."

"She does not look like the Black Cathayan girls I have seen," commented Godric; "her face is not flat, nor do her eyes slant as much."

“She has Iranian blood,” answered You-tai. “She is the daughter of a royal Black Cathayan and a Persian woman.”

“I see sadness in her eyes, at times,” said Godric.

“She remembers that she is soon to leave her mountain home,” answered You-tai, eyeing Godric closely. “She is to marry prince Wang Yin of the Chin emperors. Chamu Khan has promised her to him, for he is anxious to gain favor with Cathay. The emperor fears Genghis Khan.”

“Who is Genghis Khan?” Godric asked idly.

“A chief of the Yakka Mongols. He has grown greatly in power for the last decade. His people are nomads – fierce fighters who have so little to live for in their barren deserts that they do not mind dying. Long ago their ancestors, the Hiong-nu, were driven into the Gobi by my ancestors, the Cathayans. They are divided into many tribes and fight against one another, but Genghis Khan seems to be uniting them by conquest. I even hear wild tales that he plans to shake off the liege-ship of Cathay and even make war on his masters. But that is foolish. This small kingdom is different. Though Hia and the Keraits lie between Chamu Khan and the Yakkas, Genghis Khan is a real threat to this mountain empire.

“Black Cathay has grown to be a kingdom apart, pent in the fastnesses where no strong foe has come against them for ages. They are neither Turks nor Chinese any longer, but constitute a separate nation of their own, with separate traditions. They have never needed any alliances for protection, but now since they have grown soft and degenerate from long years of peace, even Chamu realizes their weakness and seeks to ally his house with that of the Chins of Cathay.”

Godric mused a space. “It would seem Jahadur is the key to Black Cathay. These Mongols must first take this city to make sure of their conquests. No doubt the walls throng with archers and spearmen?”

You-tai spread his hands helplessly. “No man knows the mind of Chamu Khan. There are scarce fifteen hundred warriors in the city. Chamu has even sent our strongest detachment – a troop of hard-riding western Turks – to another part of the empire. Why, no one knows. I beg you, stir not from the court until I tell you. Chamu Khan deems you a spy of Genghis Khan, I fear, and it were best if he did not send for you.”

But Chamu Khan did call for Godric before many days had drifted by. The emperor gave him audience, not in the great throne room, but in a small chamber where Chamu Khan squatted like a great fat toad on a silken divan attended by a huge black mute with a two-handed scimitar. Godric veiled the contempt in his eyes and answered Chamu Khan's questions regarding his people and his country with patience. He wondered at the absurdity of most of these questions, and at the emperor's evident ignorance and stupidity. Old Roogla, the general, a fiercely mustached, barrel-chested savage, was present and he said nothing, but his eyes strayed in comparison from the fat, helpless mass of flesh and arrogance on the cushions to the erect, broad-shouldered figure and hard, scarred face of the Frank.

From the corner of his eye Chamu Khan observed this but he was not altogether a fool. He spoke pleasantly to Godric, but the wary Norman, used to dealing with rulers, sensed that dislike was mixed with the khan's feeling of obligation, and that this dislike was mingled with fear. Chamu asked him suddenly of Genghis Khan and watched him narrowly. The sincerity of the knight's reply evidently convinced Chamu, for a shadow of relief passed over his fat face. After all, decided Godric, it was but natural that an emperor should be suspicious of a stranger in his realm, especially one of such war-like aspects as the Norman knew himself to be.

At the end of the interview, Chamu fastened a heavy golden chain about Godric's neck with his own pudgy hands. Then Godric went back to his chamber with the lapis lazuli dome, to the cherry blossoms drifting in gay-

colored clouds from the breeze-shaken trees, and to lazy strolls and talks with Yulita.

"It seems strange," said he abruptly one day, "that you are to leave this land and go to another. Somehow I can not think of you save as a slim girl forever under these blossom-heavy trees, with the dreamy fountains singing and the mountains of Black Cathay rising against the skies."

She caught her breath and turned away her face as if from an inner hurt.

"There are cherry trees in Cathay," said she, without looking at him, "and fountains too – and finer palaces than I have ever seen."

"But there are no such mountains," returned the knight.

"No," her voice was low, "there are no such mountains – nor – "

"Nor what?"

"No Frankish knight to save me from bandits," she laughed suddenly and gayly.

"Nor will there be here, long," he said somberly. "The time approaches when I must take the trail again. I come of a restless breed and I have dallied here overlong."

"Whither will you go, oh Godric?" Did she catch her breath suddenly as she spoke?

"Who knows?" In his voice was the ancient bitterness that his heathen Viking ancestors knew. "The world is before me – but not all the world with its shining leagues of sea or sand can quench the hunger that is in me. I must ride – that is all I know. I must ride till the ravens pluck my bones. Perchance I will ride back to tell Montferrat that his dream of an Eastern empire is a bubble that has burst. Perhaps I will ride east again."

"Not east," she shook her head. "The ravens are gathering in the east and there is a red flame there that pales the night. Wang Khan and his Keraits have fallen before the riders of Genghis Khan and Hia reels before his onslaught. Black Cathay too, I fear, is doomed, unless the Chins send them aid."

"Would you care if I fell?" he asked curiously.

Her clear eyes surveyed him.

"Would I care? I would care if a dog died. Surely then I would care if a man who saved my life, fell."

He shrugged his mighty shoulders. "You are kind. Today I ride. My wounds are long healed. I can lift my sword again. Thanks to your care I am strong as I ever was. This has been paradise – but I come of a restless breed.

My dream of a kingdom is shattered and I must ride – somewhere. I have heard much from the slaves and You-tai of this Genghis Khan and his chiefs. Aye, of Subotai and Chepe Noyon. I will lend my sword to him – ”

“And fight against my people?” she asked.

His gaze fell before her clear eyes. “ ’Twere the deed of a dog,” he muttered. “But what would you have? I am a soldier – I have fought for and against the same men since I rode east. A warrior must pick the winning side. And Genghis Khan, from all accounts, is a born conqueror.”

Her eyes flashed. “The Cathayans will send out an army and crush him. He can not take Jahadur – what do his skin-clad herders know of walled cities?”

“We were but a naked horde before Constantinople,” muttered Godric, “but we had hunger to drive us on and the city fell. Genghis and his men are hungry. I have seen men of the same breed. Your people are fat and indolent. Genghis Khan will ride them down like sheep.”

“And you will aid him,” she blazed.

“War is a man’s game,” he said roughly; shame hardened his tone; this slim, clear-eyed girl, so ignorant and innocent of the world’s ways, stirred old dreams of idealistic chivalry in his soul – dreams he thought long lost in the fierce necessity of life. “What do you know of war and men’s perfidy? A warrior must better himself as he may. I am weary of fighting for lost causes and getting only hard blows in return.”

“What if I asked you – begged you?” she breathed, leaning forward.

A sudden surge of madness swept him off his feet.

“For you,” he roared suddenly, like a wounded lion, “I would ride down on the Mongol yurts alone and crush them into the red earth and bring back the heads of Genghis and his khans in a cluster at my saddle-bow!”

She recoiled, gasping before the sudden loosing of his passion, but he caught her in an unconsciously rough embrace. His race loved as they hated, fiercely and violently. He would not have bruised her tender skin for all the gold in Cathay, but his own savagery swept him out of himself.

Then a sudden voice brought him to himself and he released the girl and whirled, ready to battle the whole Black Cathayan army. Old Roogla stood before them, panting.

“My princess,” he gasped; “the courtiers from Greater Cathay – they have just arrived – ”

She went white and cold as a statue.

“I am ready, oh Roogla,” she whispered.

“Ready the devil!” roared the old soldier. “Only three of them got through to the gates of Jahadur and they’re bleeding to death! You are not going to Cathay to marry Wang Yin. Not now, at least. And you’ll be lucky if you’re not dragged by the hair to Subotai’s yurt. The hills are swarming with Mongols. They cut the throats of the watchers in the passes, and ambushed the courtiers from Cathay. An hour will bring them – the whole horde of howling devils – to the very gates of Jahadur. Chamu Khan is capering about like a devil with a hornet in his khalat. We can’t send you out now – Genghis holds all the outer passes. The western Turks might give you sanctuary – but we can not reach them. There’s only one thing to do – and that’s hold the city! But with these fat, perfume-scented, wine-bibbing dogs that call themselves soldiery we’ll be lucky if we get to strike a single blow in our defense – ”

Yulita turned to Godric with level eyes.

“Genghis Khan is at our gates,” said she. “Go to him.” And turning she walked swiftly into a nearby doorway.

“What did she mean?” asked old Roogla wonderingly.

Godric growled deep in his throat. “Bring my armor and my sword. I go to seek Genghis Khan – but not as she thought.”

Roogla grinned and his beard bristled. He smote Godric a blow that had rendered a lesser man senseless.

“Hai, wolf-brother!” he roared; “we’ll give Genghis a fight yet! We’ll send him back to the desert to lick his wounds if we can only keep three men in the army from fleeing! They can stand behind us and hand us weapons when we break our swords and axes, while we pile up Mongol dead so high that the women on the battlements will look up at them!”

Godric smiled thinly.

III

To grow old cowed in a conquered land,
With the sun itself discrowned,
To see trees crouch and cattle slink –
Death is a better ale to drink,
And by high Death on the fell brink,
That flagon shall go round.

– Chesterton

Godric's armor had been mended cleverly, he found, the rents in hauberk and helmet fused with such skill that no sign of a gash showed. The knight's armor was unusually strong, anyway, and of a weight few men could have borne. The blades that had wounded him in the battle of the defiles had hacked through old dents. Now that these were mended, the armor was like new. The heavy mail was reinforced with solid plates of steel on breast, back and shoulders and the sword belt was of joined steel plates a hand's breadth wide. The helmet, instead of being merely a steel cap with a long nasal, worn over a mail hood, as was the case of most Crusaders, was made with a vizor and fitted firmly into the steel shoulder-pieces. The whole armor showed the trend of the times – chain and scale mail giving way gradually to plate armor.

Godric experienced a fierce resurge of power as he felt the familiar weight of his mail and fingered the worn hilt of his long, two-handed sword. The languorous illusive dreaminess of the past weeks vanished; again he was a conqueror of a race of conquerors. With old Roogla he rode to the main gates, seeing on all hands the terror that had seized the people. Men and women ran distractedly through the streets, crying that the Mongols were upon them; they tied their belongings into bundles, loaded them on donkeys and jerked them off again, shouting reproaches at the soldiers on the walls, who seemed as frightened as the people.

"Cowards!" Old Roogla's beard bristled. "What they need is war to stiffen their thews. Well, they've got war now and they'll have to fight."

"A man can always run," answered Godric sardonically.

They came to the outer gates and found a band of soldiery there, handling their pikes and bows nervously. They brightened slightly as Roogla and Godric rode up. The tale of the Norman's battle with the Hian bandits had lost nothing in the telling. But Godric was surprized to note their fewness.

"Are these all your soldiers?"

Roogla shook his head.

"Most of them are at the Pass of Skulls," he growled. "It's the only way a large force of men can approach Jahadur. In the past we've held it easily against all comers – but these Mongols are devils. I left enough men here to hold the city against any stray troops that might climb down the cliffs."

They rode out of the gates and down the winding mountain trail. On one side rose a sheer wall, a thousand feet high. On the other side the cliff fell away three times that distance into a fathomless chasm. A mile's ride brought them to the Pass of Skulls. Here the trail debouched into a sort of upland plateau, passing between two walls of sheer rock.

A thousand warriors were encamped there, gaudy in their silvered mail, long-toed leather boots and gold-chased weapons. With their peaked helmets with mail drops, their long spears and wide-bladed scimitars, they seemed war-like enough. They were big men, but they were evidently nervous and uncertain.

"By the blood of the devil, Roogla," snapped Godric, "have you no more soldiers than these?"

"Most of the troops are scattered throughout the empire," Roogla answered. "I warned Chamu Khan to collect all the warriors in the empire here, but he refused to do so. Why, Erlik alone knows. Well, a man can always die."

He rose in his saddle and his great voice roared through the hills:

"Men of Black Cathay, you know me of old! But here beside me is one you know only by word of mouth; a chief out of the West who will fight beside you today. Now take heart, and when Genghis comes up the defile, show him Black Cathayans can still die like men!"

"Not so fast," growled Godric. "This pass looks impregnable to me. May I have a word as to the arranging of the troops?"

Roogla spread his hands. "Assuredly."

"Then set men to work rebuilding that barricade," snapped Godric, pointing to the wavering lines of stone, half tumbled down, which spanned the pass. "Build it high and block that gate. There'll be no caravans passing

through today. I thought you were a soldier; it should have been done long ago. Put your best bowmen behind the first line of stone. Then the spearmen, and the swordsmen and ax-fighters behind the spearmen – ”

———

The long hot day wore on. At last far away sounded the deep rattle of many kettledrums, then a thunder of myriad hoofs. Then up the deep defile and out onto the plateau swept a bizarre and terrible horde. Godric had expected a wild, motley mass of barbarians, like a swarm of locusts without order or system. These men rode in compact formation, of such as he had never before seen; in well ordered ranks, divided into troops of a thousand each.

The tugh, the yak-tail standards, were lifted above them. At the sight of their orderly array and hard-bitten appearance, Godric’s heart sank. These men were used to fierce warfare; they outnumbered his own soldiers by seven times. How could he hope to hold the pass against them, even for a little while? Godric swore deeply and fervently and put the hope of survival from him; thereafter during the whole savage fight, his one idea was to do as much damage to the enemy as he possibly could before he died.

Now he stood on the first line of fortifications and gazed curiously at the advancing hosts, seeing stocky, broad-built men mounted on wiry horses, men with square flat faces, devoid of humor or mercy, whose armor was plain stuff of hardened leather, lacquer, or iron plates laced together. With a wry face he noted the short, heavy bows and long arrows. From the look of those bows he knew they would drive shafts through ordinary mail as if it were paper. Their other weapons consisted of spears, short-handled axes, maces and curved sabers, lighter and more easily handled than the huge two-handed scimitars of the Black Cathayans.

Roogla, standing at his shoulder, pointed to a giant riding ahead of the army.

“Subotai,” he growled, “a Uriankhi – from the frozen tundras, with a heart as cold as his native land. He can twist a spear shaft in two between his hands. The tall fop riding beside him is Chepe Noyon; note his silvered mail and heron plumes. And by Erlik, there is Kassar the Strong, sword-bearer to the khan. Well – if Genghis himself is not here now, he soon will be, for he never allows Kassar long out of his sight – the Strong One is a fool, useful only in actual combat.”

Godric's cold gray eyes were fixed on the giant form of Subotai; a growing fury stirred in him, not a tangible hatred of the Uriankhi but the fighting rage one strong man feels when confronted by a foe his equal in prowess. The knight expected a parley but evidently the Mongols were of a different mind. They came sweeping across the boulder-strewn plateau like a wind from hell, a swarm of mounted bowmen preceding them.

"Down!" roared Godric, as shafts began to rain around him. "Down behind the rocks! Spearmen and swordsmen lie flat! Archers return their fire."

Roogla repeated the shout and arrows began to fly from the barricades. But the effort was half-hearted. The sight of that onrushing horde had numbed the men of Jahadur. Godric had never seen men ride and shoot from the saddle as these Mongols did. They were barely within arrow flight, yet men were falling along the lines of stone. He felt the Jahadurans wavering – realized with a flood of blind rage that they would break before the Mongol heavy cavalry reached the barricade.

A bowman near him roared and fell backward with an arrow through his throat and a shout went up from the faltering Black Cathayans.

"Fools!" raged Godric, smiting right and left with clenched fists. "Horsemen can never take this pass if you stand to it! Bend your bows and throw your shoulders into it! Fight, damn you!"

The bowmen had split to either side, and through the gap the flying swordsmen swept. Now if ever was the time to break the charge, but the Jahaduran bowmen loosed wildly or not at all and behind them the spearmen were scrambling up to flee. Old Roogla was screaming and tearing his hair, cursing the day he was born, and not a man had fallen on the Mongols' side. Even at that distance Godric, standing upright on the barricade, saw the broad grin on Subotai's face. With a bitter curse he tore a spear from the hand of a warrior near by and threw every ounce of his mighty-thewed frame into the cast.

It was too far for an ordinary spear-cast even to carry – but with a hum the spear hissed through the air and the Mongol next to Subotai fell headlong, transfixed. From the Black Cathayan ranks rose a sudden roar. These riders could be slain after all! And surely no mortal man could have made that cast! Godric, towering above them on the barricade, like a man of iron, suddenly assumed supernatural proportions in the eyes of the warriors behind him. How could they be defeated when such a man led them? The

quick fire of Oriental battle-lust blazed up and sudden courage surged through the veins of the wavering warriors. With a shout they pulled shaft to ear and loosed, and a sudden hail of death smote the charging Mongols. At that range there was no missing. Those long shafts tore through buckler and hauberk, transfixing the wearers. Flesh and blood could not stand it. The charge did not exactly break, but in the teeth of that iron gale the squadrons wheeled and circled away out of range. A wild yell of triumph rose from the Jahadurans and they waved their spears and shouted taunts.

Old Roogla was in ecstasies, but Godric snarled a mirthless laugh. At least he had whipped courage into the Black Cathayans. But here, he knew, he and Roogla and all the others would leave their corpses before the day was over. And Yulita – he would not allow himself to think of her. At least, he swore, a red mist waving in front of his eyes, Subotai would not take her.

The yak tails were waving, the kettledrums beating for another charge. This time the bowmen rode out more warily, loosing a perfect rain of shafts. At Godric's order his men did not return the fire, but sheltered themselves behind their barricade; he himself stood contemptuously upright, trusting to the strength of his half-plate armor. He became the center of the fire, but the long shafts glanced harmlessly from his shield or splintered on his hauberk. The horsemen wheeled closer, drawing harder on their heavy bows, and at Godric's word the Jahadurans answered them. In a short fierce exchange the men in the open had the worst of it. They galloped out of range with several empty saddles, but Godric had not let his attention stray from the real menace – the heavily armed cavalry. These had approached at a rapid trot while the arrow fire was being exchanged, and now they struck in the spurs and came like a bolt from a crossbow.

Again the sweeping rain of arrows met and broke them, though this time their momentum carried them to within a hundred feet of the barricades. One rider broke through to the lines and Godric saw a wild figure, spurting blood and hewing madly at him. Then as the Mongol rose in his stirrups to reach the knight's head, a dozen spears, thrusting over the backs of the bowmen, pierced him and hurled him headlong.

Again the Mongols retreated out of range, but this time their losses had been severe. Riderless horses ranged the plateau, which was dotted with still or writhing forms.

Already the Jahadurans had inflicted more damage on the men of Genghis Khan than the Mongols were accustomed to. But from the way the nomads ranged themselves for the third charge, Godric knew that this time no flight of arrows would stop them. He spared a moment's admiration for their courage.

The supply of arrows was running low. Black Cathay, as in all things pertaining to war, had neglected the manufacture of war-arrows. A large number of shafts remaining in the quivers of the archers were hunting-arrows, good only at short range.

This time there was no great exchange between the bowmen. The archers of Subotai mingled themselves among the front ranks of the swordsmen, and when the charge came, a sheet of arrows preceded it.

"Save your shafts!" roared Godric, gripping the ax he had chosen from the arms of Jahadur. "Back, archers – spearmen, on the wall!"

The next moment the headlong horde broke like a red wave on the barricade. Evidently they had misjudged the strength of those stone lines, not knowing them newly reinforced – had expected to shatter them by sheer weight and velocity and to ride through the ruins. But the strengthened walls held. Horses hit the barricade with a splintering of bones, and men's brains were dashed out by the shock. Doubtless they had expected to

sacrifice the first line, but the slaughter was greater than they could have reckoned. The second line, hot on the heels of the first, plunged against the wall over its writhing remnants, and the third line piled up on both. The whole line of the barricade was a red welter of dying, screaming horses, lashing hoofs and writhing men, while the blood-maddened Jahadurans yelled like wolves, hacking and stabbing down at the crimson shambles.

The rear lines ruthlessly trampled down their dying comrades to strike at the defenders, but the ground was thick with dead and wounded and the plunging, writhing horses fouled the hoofs that swept over them.

Still, some of the Mongols did gain through to the lines and made a desperate effort to clamber over the wall. They died like rats in a trap beneath the lunging spears of the inspired Black Cathayans.

One, a huge brutal-faced giant, rode over a writhing welter of red torn flesh, reined in close to the barricade and an iron mace in his hands dashed out the brains of a spearman. From both hosts rose a shout of: “Kassar!”

“Kassar, eh?” growled Godric, stepping forward on the precarious top of the barricade. The giant rose in his stirrups, the clotted mace swung back and at that instant the twenty-pound battle-ax in Godric’s right hand crashed down on the peaked helmet. Ax and helmet shattered together and the steed went to his knees under the shock. Then it reared and plunged wildly away, Kassar’s crumpled body lolling and swaying in the saddle, held by the deep stirrups.

Godric tossed away the splintered ax-haft and picked up the mace that had fallen on the stones. He heard old Roogla shouting: “Bogda! Bogda! Bogda! Gurgaslan!”

The whole host of Jahadur took up the shout; thus Godric gained his new name, which means the Lion, and crimson was the christening.

The Mongols were again in slow, stubborn retreat and Godric brandished the mace and shouted: “Ye be men! Stand to it boldly! Already have you slain more than half your own number!”

But he knew that now the real death grip was about to be. The Mongols were dismounting. Horsemen by nature and choice, they had realized however that cavalry charges could never take those solid walls, manned by inspired madmen. They held their round, lacquered bucklers before them and swung stolidly onward in much the same formation as they had maintained mounted.

They rolled like a black tide over the corpse-strewn plain and like a black flood they burst on the spear-bristling wall. Few arrows were loosed on either side. The Black Cathayans had emptied their quivers and the Mongols wished only to come to hand-grips.

The line of barricades became a red line of hell. Spears jabbed downward, curved blades broke on lances. In the very teeth of the girding steel, the Mongols strove to climb the wall, piling heaps of their own dead for grim ladders. Most of them were pierced by the spears of the defenders, and the few who did win over the barriers were cut down by the swordsmen behind the spearmen.

The nomads perforce fell back a few yards, then surged on again. The terrific shocks of their impact shook the whole barricade. These men needed no shouts or commands to spur them on. They were fired with an indomitable will which emanated from within as well as from without. Godric saw Chepe Noyon fighting silently on foot with the rest of the warriors. Subotai sat his horse a few yards back of the mass, directing the movements.

Charge after charge crashed against the barriers. The Mongols were wasting lives like water and Godric wondered at their unquenchable resolve to conquer this relatively unimportant mountain kingdom. But he realized that Genghis Khan’s whole future as a conqueror depended on his stamping out *all* opposition, no matter what the cost.

The wall was crumbling. The Mongols were tearing it to pieces. They could not climb it, so they thrust their spears between the stones and loosened them, tearing them away with bare hands. They died as they toiled, but their comrades trampled their corpses and took up their work.

Subotai leaped from his horse, snatched a heavy curved sword from his saddle and joined the warriors on foot. He gained to the center of the wall and tore at it with his naked hands, disdaining the down-lunging spears which broke on his helmet and armor. A breach was made and the Mongols began to surge through.

Godric yelled fiercely and leaped to stem the sudden tide, but a wash of the black wave over the wall hemmed him in with howling fiends. A crashing sweep of his mace cleared a red way and he plunged through. The Mongols were coming over the ruins of the barriers and through the great breach Subotai had made. Godric shouted for the Jahadurans to fall back,

and even as he did, he saw Roogla parrying the whistling strokes of Chepe Noyon's curved scimitar.

The old general was bleeding already from a deep gash in the thigh, and even as the Norman sprang to aid him, the Mongol's blade cut through Roogla's mail and blood spurted. Roogla slumped slowly to the earth and Chepe Noyon wheeled to meet the knight's furious charge. He flung up his sword to parry the whistling mace, but the giant Norman in his berserk rage dealt a blow that made nothing of skill or tempered steel. The scimitar flew to singing sparks, the helmet cracked and Chepe Noyon was dashed to earth like a pole-axed steer.

"Bear Roogla back!" roared Godric, leaping forward and swinging his mace up again to dash out the prostrate Mongol's brains as a man kills a wounded snake. But even as the mace crashed downward, a squat warrior leaped like a panther, arms wide, shielding the fallen chieftain's body with his own and taking the stroke on his own head. His shattered corpse fell across Chepe Noyon and a sudden determined rush of Mongols bore Godric back. Even as the Jahadurans bore the desperately wounded Roogla back across the next line of stone, the Mongols lifted the stunned Chepe Noyon and carried him out of the battle.

Fighting stubbornly, Godric retreated, half ringed by the squat shapes that fought so silently and thrust so fiercely for his life. He reached the next wall, over which the Jahadurans had already gone, and for a moment stood at bay, back against the stones, while spears flashed at him and curved sabers hacked at him. His armor had saved him thus far, though a shrewd thrust had girded deep into the calf of his leg and a heavy blow on his hauberk had partly numbed the shoulder beneath.

Now the Black Cathayans leaned over the wall, cleared a space with their spears and seizing their champion under the armpits, lifted him bodily over. The fight rolled on. Life became to the men on the walls one red continuance of hurtling bodies and lunging blades. The spears of the defenders were bent or splintered. The arrows were gone. Half the Black Cathayans were dead. Most of the rest were wounded. But possessed of a fanatical fervor they fought on, swinging their notched axes and blunted scimitars as fiercely as if the fight had but started. The full fighting fury of their Turkish ancestors was roused and only death could quench it. After all, they were of the same blood as these unconquerable demons from the Gobi.

The second barricade crumbled and the Jahadurans began to fall back to the last line of barricades. But this time the Mongols were over the falling stones and upon them before they could make good their escape. Godric and fifty men, covering the withdrawal of the rest, were cut off. Then the others would have come back over the wall to aid them, but a solid mass of Mongols were between that balked their fiercest efforts.

Godric's men died about him like hunted wolves, slaying and dying without a groan or whimper. Their last gasps were snarls of deathless fury. Their heavy two-handed scimitars wrought fearful destruction among their stocky foes but the Mongols ran in under the sweep of the blades and ripped upward with their shorter sabers.

Godric's plated mail saved him from chance blows and his enormous strength and amazing quickness made him all but invincible. His shield he had long discarded. He gripped the heavy mace in both hands and it smashed like a black god of death through the battle rout. Blood and brains splashed like water as shields, helmets and corselets gave way.

Across the heads of the hacking warriors Godric saw the giant frame of Subotai, looming head and shoulders above his men. With a curse the Norman hurled the mace, which spattered blood as it hummed through the air. Men cried out at the long cast, but Subotai ducked swiftly. Godric whipped out his two-handed sword for the first time during the fight, and the long straight blade which the Pope had blessed years ago shimmered like a living thing – like the blue waves of the western sea.

It was a heavy blade, forged to cut through thick mail and strong plates, armor many times heavier than that worn by most Orientals, who usually preferred shirts of light chain mail. Godric wielded it in one hand as lightly as most men could swing it with both. His left hand held a dirk, point upward, and they who ducked beneath the sword to grapple, died from the thrust of the shorter blade. The Norman set his back against a heap of dead, and in a red haze of battle madness, split skulls to the teeth, cleft bosoms to the spine, severed shoulder bones, hewed through neck cords, hacked off legs at the hip and arms at the shoulder until they gave back in sudden, unaccustomed fear and stood panting and eyeing him as hunters eye a wounded tiger.

And Godric laughed at them, taunted them, spat in their faces. Centuries of civilizing French influence were wiped away; it was a berserk Viking who faced his paling foes.

He was wounded, he faintly sensed, but unweakened. The fire of fury left no room in his brain for any other sensation. A giant form surged through the ranks, flinging men right and left as spray is flung by a charging galley. Subotai of the frozen tundras stood before his foe at last.

Godric took in the height of the man, the mighty sweep of chest and shoulder, and the massive arms which wielded the sword that had more than once, during the fight, sheared clear through the torso of a mailed Jahaduran.

“Back!” roared Subotai, his fierce eyes alight – those eyes were blue, Godric noted, and the Mongol’s hair red; surely somewhere in that frozen land of tundras a wandering Aryan strain had mingled with the Turanian blood of Subotai’s tribe – “Back, and give us room! None shall slay this chief but Subotai!”

Somewhere down the deep defile there sounded a rally of kettledrums and the tramp of many hoofs, but Godric was hardly aware he heard. He saw the Mongols fall back, leaving a space clear. He heard Chepe Noyon, still slightly groggy, and with a new helmet, shouting orders at the men who surged about the wall. Fighting ceased altogether and all eyes turned on the chiefs, who swung up their blades and rushed together like two maddened bulls.

Godric knew that his armor would never stand against the full sweep of the great sword Subotai was swinging in his right hand. The Norman leaped and struck as a tiger strikes, throwing every ounce of his body behind the blow and nerving himself to superhuman quickness. His heavy, straight blade sheared through the lacquered buckler Subotai flung above his head, and crashing full on the peaked helmet, bit through to the scalp beneath. Subotai staggered, a jet of blood trickling down his dark face, but almost instantly swung a decapitating stroke that whistled harmlessly through the air as Godric bent his knees quickly.

The Frank thrust viciously but Subotai evaded the lunging point with a twist of his huge frame and hacked in savagely. Godric sprang away but could not entirely avoid the blow. The great blade struck under his armpit, crunched through the mail and bit deep into his ribs. The impact numbed his whole left side and in an instant his hauberk was full of blood.

Stung to renewed madness, Godric sprang in, parrying the scimitar, then dropped his sword and grappled Subotai. The Mongol returned the fierce embrace, drawing a dagger. Close-locked they wrestled and strained,

staggering on hard-braced legs, each seeking to break the other's spine or to drive home his own blade. Both weapons were reddened in an instant as they girded through crevices in the armor or were driven straight through solid mail, but neither could free his hand enough to drive in a death thrust.

Godric was gasping for breath; he felt that the pressure of the Mongol's huge arms was crushing him. But Subotai was in no better way. The Norman saw sweat thickly beading the Mongol's brow, heard his breath coming in heavy pants, and a savage joy shook him.

Subotai lifted his foe bodily to dash him headlong, but Godric's grip held them together so firmly this was impossible. With both feet braced on the blood-soaked earth again, Godric suddenly ceased trying to free his dirk wrist from Subotai's iron grip, and releasing the Mongol's dagger arm, drove his left fist into Subotai's face.

With the full power of mighty arm and broad shoulders behind it, the blow was like that of a club. Blood spattered and Subotai's head snapped back as if on hinges – but at that instant he drove his dagger deep in Godric's breast muscles. The Norman gasped, staggered, and then in a last burst of strength he flung the Mongol from him. Subotai fell his full length and rose slowly, dazedly, like a man who has fought out the last red ounce of his endurance. His mighty frame sagged back on the arms of the ringing warriors and he shook his head like a bull, striving to nerve himself again for the combat.

Godric recovered the sword he had dropped and now he faced his foes, feet braced wide against his sick dizziness. He groped a moment for support and felt firm stones at his back. The fight had carried them almost to the last barricades. There he faced the Mongols like a wounded lion at bay, head lowered on his mighty, mailed breast, terrible eyes glittering through the bars of his vizor, both hands gripping his red sword.

"Come on," he challenged as he felt his life waning in thick red surges. "Mayhap I die – but I will slay seven of you before I die. Come in and make an ending, you pagan swine!"

Men thronged the plateau behind the tattered horde – thousands of them. A powerful, bearded chieftain on a white horse rode forward and surveyed the silent, battle-weary Mongols and the stone bulwark with its thin ranks of bloody defenders. This, Godric knew in a weary way, was the great Genghis

Khan and he wished he had enough life left in him to charge through the ranks and hew the khan from his saddle; but weakness began to steal over him.

“A good thing I came with the Horde,” said Genghis Khan sardonically. “It seems these Cathayans have been drinking some wine that makes men of them. They have slain more Mongols already than the Keraits and the Hians did. Who spurred these scented women to battle?”

“He.” Chepe Noyon pointed to the blood-stained knight. “By Erlik, they have drunk blood this day. The Frank is a devil; my head still sings from the blow he dealt me; Kassar is but now recovering his senses from an ax the Frank shattered on his helmet, and he has but now fought Subotai himself to a standstill.”

Genghis reined his horse forward and Godric tensed himself. If the khan would only come within reach – a sudden spring, a last, desperate blow – if he could but take this paynim lord with him to the realm of death, he would die content.

The great, deep gray eyes of Genghis were upon the knight and he felt their full power.

“You are of such steel as my chiefs are forged from,” said Genghis. “I would have you for friend, not foe. You are not of the race of those men; come and serve under me.”

“My ears are dull with blows on my helmet,” answered Godric, tightening his grip on his hilt and tensing his weary muscles; “I can not understand you. Come closer that I may hear you.”

Instead Genghis reined his steed back a few paces and grinned with tolerant understanding.

“Will you serve me?” he persisted. “I will make you a chief.”

“And what of these?” Godric indicated the Black Cathayans.

Genghis shrugged his shoulders. “What am I to do with them? They must die.”

“Go to your brother the Devil,” Godric growled. “I come of a race that sell their swords for gold – but we are no jackals to turn on men that have bled beside us. These warriors and I have already killed more than our own number and wounded many more of your warriors. There are still three hundred of us left and the strongest of the barricades. We have slain over a thousand of your wolves – if you enter Jahadur you ride over our corpses. Charge in now and see how desperate men can die.”

“But you owe no allegiance to Jahadur,” argued Genghis.

“I owe my life to Chamu Khan,” snapped Godric. “I have thrown in my lot with him and I serve him with as much fealty as if he were the Pope himself.”

“You are a fool,” Genghis said frankly. “I have long had my spies among the Jahadurans. Chamu Khan planned to sacrifice Jahadur and all therein to save his own hide. That is why he refused to bring more soldiers to the city. His main force he gathered on the western border. He planned to flee by a secret way through the cliffs as soon as I attacked the pass.

“Well, he did, but some of my warriors came upon him. They only asked a gift of him,” Genghis chuckled. “Then they made no effort to hinder him. He might then go where he would. Would you see the gift they took from Chamu Khan?”

And a Mongol behind the khan held up a ghastly, grinning head. Godric cursed: “Liar, traitor and coward though he was, he was yet a king. Come in and make an ending. I swear to you that before you ride over this wall, your horses will tread fetlock-deep in a carpet of your dead.”

Still Genghis sat his horse and pondered. Subotai came up to him, and grinning broadly, spoke in his ear. The Khan nodded.

“Swear to serve me and I will spare the lives of your men; I will take Black Cathay unharmed into my empire.”

Godric turned to his men. “You heard – I would rather die here on a heap of Mongol dead – but it is for you to say.”

They answered with a shout: “The emperor is dead! Why should we die, if Genghis Khan will grant us peace? Give us Gurgaslan for ruler and we will serve you.”

Genghis raised his hand. “So be it!”

Godric shook the blood and sweat out of his eyes and snarled a bitter laugh.

“A puppet king on a tinsel throne, to dance on your string, Mongol? *No!* Get another for the task.”

Genghis scowled and suddenly swore. “By the yellow face of Erlik! I have already made more concessions today than I ever made in my life before! What want ye, Gurgaslan – shall I give you my scepter for a war-club?”

“If he wishes it you may as well give it to him,” grinned Subotai, who was no more awed by his khan than if Genghis had been a horse-boy. “These Franks are built of iron without and within. Reason with him, Genghis!”

The khan glared at his general for a moment as if he were of a mind to brain him, then grinned suddenly. These men of the steppes were a frank, open race greatly different from the devious-minded peoples of Asia Minor.

“To have you and your warriors fighting beside me,” said Genghis calmly, “I will do that which I never expected to do. You are fit to tread the crimson road of empire. Take Black Cathay and rule it as you will; I ask only that you aid me in my wars, as an equal ally. We will be two kings, reigning side by side and aiding each other against all enemies.”

Godric’s thin lips smiled. “It is fair enough.”

The Mongols sent up a thunderous roar and the bloody Jahadurans swarmed over the barricades to kiss the hands of their new ruler. He did not hear Genghis say to the warrior who bore the grisly severed head of Chamu Khan: “See that the skull is prepared and sheathed in silver, and set among the rest that were khans of tribes; when I fall I would wish my own skull treated with the same respect.”

Godric felt a firm grasp on his hand and looked into the steady eyes of Subotai, feeling a rush of friendship for the man that equaled his former rage.

“Erlik, what a man!” growled the chief. “We should be good comrades, Gurgaslan! Here – by the gods, man, you are sorely wounded! He swoons –

get off his armor and see to his hurts, you thick-headed fools, do you want him to die?”

“Scant chance,” grinned Chepe Noyon, feeling his head tenderly. “Such men as he are not made to die from steel. Wait, you big buffalo, you’ll kill him with your clumsiness. I’ll bring one more fitted to attend him – one that was found being forcibly escorted out of Jahadur by the palace eunuchs. I saw her only five minutes agone and I am almost ready to cut your throat for her, Gurgaslan. Genghis, will you bid them bring the girl?”

Again Godric saw, as in a closing mist, two great dark eyes bend over him – he felt soft arms go about his neck and heard a sobbing in his ear.

“Well, Yulita,” he said as in a dream, “I went to Genghis Khan after all!”

“You saved Black Cathay, my king,” she sobbed, pressing her lips against his. Then while his dull head swam those soft lips were withdrawn and a goblet took their place, filled with a stinging wine that jerked him back into consciousness.

Genghis was standing over him.

“You have already found your queen, eh?” he smiled. “Well – rest of your wounds; I will not need your aid for some months yet. Marry your queen, organize your kingdom – there is a great army drawn up on the western border ready to your hand now that there is to be no invasion of your kingdom. It may be the western Turks will dispute your liegeship – you have but to send the word and I will send you as many riders as you need. When the desert grass deepens for spring, we ride into Greater Cathay.”

The khan turned on his heel and strode away and Godric gathered the slim form of Yulita into his weary arms.

“Wang Yin will wait long for his bride,” said he, and the laughter of Yulita was like the tinkle of the silvery fountains in the cherry blossom courts of Jahadur. And so the dream that had haunted Godric de Villehard of an Eastern empire woke to life.

The Sowers of the Thunder

Iron winds and ruin and flame,
And a Horseman shaking with giant mirth;
Over the corpse-strewn, blackened earth
Death, stalking naked, came
Like a storm-cloud shattering the ships;
Yet the Rider seated high,
Paled at the smile on a dead king’s lips,
As the tall white horse went by.

– The Ballad of Baibars

I

The idlers in the tavern glanced up at the figure framed in the doorway. It was a tall broad man who stood there, with the torch-lit shadows and the clamor of the bazaars at his back. His garments were a simple tunic, and short breeches of leather; a camel's-hair mantle hung from his broad shoulders and sandals were on his feet. But belying the garb of the peaceful traveller, a short straight stabbing sword hung at his girdle. One massive arm, ridged with muscles, was outstretched, the brawny hand gripping a pilgrim's staff, as the man stood, powerful legs wide-braced, in the doorway. His bare legs were hairy, knotted like tree-trunks. His coarse red locks were confined by a single band of blue cloth, and from his square dark face, his strange blue eyes blazed with a kind of reckless and wayward mirth, reflected by the half-smile that curved his thin lips.

His glance passed over the hawk-faced seafarers and ragged loungers who brewed tea and squabbled endlessly, to rest on a man who sat apart at a rough-hewn table, with a wine pitcher. Such a man the watcher in the door had never seen – tall, deep-chested, broad-shouldered, built with the dangerous suppleness of a panther. His eyes were as cold as blue ice, set off by a mane of golden hair tinted with red; so to the man in the doorway that hair seemed like burning gold. The man at the table wore a light shirt of silvered mail, a long lean sword hung at his hip, and on the bench beside him lay a kite-shaped shield and a light helmet.

The man in the guise of a traveller strode purposefully forward and halted, hands resting on the table across which he smiled mockingly at the other, and spoke in a tongue strange to the seated man, newly come to the East.

This one turned to an idler and asked in Norman French: "What does the infidel say?"

"I said," replied the traveller in the same tongue, "that a man can not even enter an Egyptian inn these days without finding some dog of a Christian under his feet."

As the traveller had spoken the other had risen, and now the speaker dropped his hand to his sword. Scintillant lights flickered in the other's eyes and he moved like a flash of summer lightning. His left hand darted out to lock in the breast of the traveller's tunic, and in his right hand the long

sword flashed out. The traveller was caught flat-footed, his sword half clear of its sheath. But the faint smile did not leave his lips and he stared almost childishly at the blade that flickered before his eyes, as if fascinated by its dazzling.

“Heathen dog,” snarled the swordsman, and his voice was like the slash of a blade through fabric, “I’ll send you to Hell unshriven!”

“What panther whelped you that you move as a cat strikes?” responded the other curiously, as calmly as if his life were not weighing in the balance. “But you took me by surprize. I did not know that a Frank dare draw sword in Damietta.”

The Frank glared at him moodily; the wine he had drunk showed in the dangerous gleams that played in his eyes where lights and shadows continuously danced and shifted.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“Haroun the Traveller,” the other grinned. “Put up your steel. I crave pardon for my gibing words. It seems there are Franks of the old breed yet.”

With a change of mood the Frank thrust his sword back into its sheath with an impatient clash. Turning back to his bench he indicated table and wine pitcher with a sweeping gesture.

“Sit and refresh yourself; if you are a traveller, you have a tale to tell.”

Haroun did not at once comply. His gaze swept the inn and he beckoned the innkeeper, who came grudgingly forward. As he approached the Traveller, the innkeeper suddenly shrank back with a low half-stifled cry. Haroun’s eyes went suddenly merciless and he said, “What then, host, do you see in me a man you have known aforetime, perchance?”

His voice was like the purr of a hunting tiger and the wretched innkeeper shivered as with an ague, his dilated eyes fixed on the broad corded hand that stroked the hilt of the stabbing-sword.

“No, no, master,” he mouthed. “By Allah, I know you not – I never saw you before – and Allah grant I never see you again,” he added mentally.

“Then tell me what does this Frank here, in mail and wearing a sword,” ordered Haroun bruskly, in Turki. “The dog-Venetians are allowed to trade in Damietta as in Alexandria, but they pay for the privilege in humility and insult, and none dares gird on a blade here – much less lift it against a Believer.”

“He is no Venetian, good Haroun,” answered the innkeeper. “Yesterday he came ashore from a Venetian trading-galley, but he consorts not with the

traders or the crew of the infidels. He strides boldly through the streets, wearing steel openly and ruffling against all who would cross him. He says he is going to Jerusalem and could not find a ship bound for any port in Palestine, so came here, intending to travel the rest of the way by land. The Believers have said he is mad, and none molests him."

"Truly, the mad are touched by Allah and given His protection," mused Haroun. "Yet this man is not altogether mad, I think. Bring wine, dog!"

The innkeeper ducked in a deep salaam and hastened off to do the Traveller's bidding. The Prophet's command against strong drink was among other orthodox precepts disobeyed in Damietta where many nations foregathered and Turk rubbed shoulders with Copt, Arab with Sudani.

Haroun seated himself opposite the Frank and took the wine goblet proffered by a servant.

"You sit in the midst of your enemies like a shah of the East, my lord," he grinned. "By Allah, you have the bearing of a king."

"I am a king, infidel," growled the other; the wine he had drunk had touched him with a reckless and mocking madness.

"And where lies your kingdom, *malik*?" The question was not asked in mockery. Haroun had seen many broken kings drifting among the debris that floated Eastward.

"On the dark side of the moon," answered the Frank with a wild and bitter laugh. "Among the ruins of all the unborn or forgotten empires which etch the twilight of the lost ages. Cahal Ruadh O'Donnel, king of Ireland – the name means naught to you, Haroun of the East, and naught to the land which was my birthright. They who were my foes sit in the high seats of power, they who were my vassals lie cold and still, the bats haunt my shattered castles, and already the name of Red Cahal is dim in the memories of men. So – fill up my goblet, slave!"

"You have the soul of a warrior, *malik*. Was it treachery overcame you?"

"Aye, treachery," swore Cahal, "and the wiles of a woman who coiled about my soul until I was as one blind – to be cast out at the end like a broken pawn. Aye, the Lady Elinor de Courcey, with her black hair like midnight shadows on Lough Derg, and the gray eyes of her, like – " He started suddenly, like a man waking from a trance, and his wayward eyes blazed.

“Saints and devils!” he roared. “Who are you that I should spill out my soul to? The wine has betrayed me and loosened my tongue, but I – ” He reached for his sword but Haroun laughed.

“I’ve done you no harm, *malik*. Turn this murderous spirit of yours into another channel. By Erlik, I’ll give you a test to cool your blood!”

Rising, he caught up a javelin lying beside a drunken soldier, and striding around the table, his eyes recklessly alight, he extended his massive arm, gripping the shaft close to the middle, point upward.

“Grip the shaft, *malik*,” he laughed. “In all my days I have met no one who was man enough to twist a stave out of my hand.”

Cahal rose and gripped the shaft so that his clenched fingers almost touched those of Haroun. Then, legs braced wide, arms bent at the elbow, each man exerted his full strength against the other. They were well matched; Cahal was a trifle taller, Haroun thicker of body. It was bear opposed to tiger. Like two statues they stood straining, neither yielding an inch, the javelin almost motionless under the equal forces. Then with a sudden rending snap the tough wood gave way and each man staggered, holding half the shaft, which had parted under the terrific strain.

“Hai!” shouted Haroun, his eyes sparkling; then they dulled with sudden doubt.

“By Allah, *malik*,” said he, “this is an ill thing! Of two men, one should be master of the other, lest both come to a bad end. Yet this signifies that neither of us will ever yield to the other, and in the end, each will work the other ill.”

“Sit down and drink,” answered the Gael, tossing aside the broken shaft and reaching for the wine goblet, his dreams of lost grandeur and his anger both apparently forgotten. “I have not been long in the East, but I knew not there were such as you among the paynim. Surely you are not one with the Egyptians, Arabs and Turks I have seen.”

“I was born far to the east, among the tents of the Golden Horde, on the steppes of High Asia,” said Haroun, his mood changing back to joviality as he flung himself down on his bench. “Ha! I was almost a man grown before I heard of Muhammad – on whom peace! *Hai*, *bogatyr*, I have been many things! Once I was a princeling of the Tatars – son of the lord Subotai who was right hand to Genghis Khan. Once I was a slave – when the Turkomans drove a raid east and carried off youths and girls from the Horde. In the slave markets of El Kahira I was sold for three pieces of silver, by Allah,

and my master gave me to the Bahairiz – the slave-soldiers – because he feared I'd strangle him. Ha! Now I am Haroun the Traveller, making pilgrimage to the holy place. But once, only a few days agone, I was man to Baibars – whom the devil fly away with!"

"Men say in the streets that this Baibars is the real ruler of Cairo," said Cahal curiously; new to the East though he was, he had heard that name oft-repeated.

"Men lie," responded Haroun. "The sultan rules Egypt and Shadjar ad Darr rules the sultan. Baibars is only the general of the Bahairiz – the great oaf!

"I was his man!" he shouted suddenly, with a great laugh, "to come and go at his bidding – to put him to bed – to rise with him – to sit down at meat with him – aye, and to put food and drink into his fool's-mouth. But I have escaped him! By Allah, by Allah and by Allah, I have naught to do with this great fool Baibars tonight! I am a free man and the devil may fly away with him and with the sultan, and Shadjar ad Darr and all Saladin's empire! I am my own man tonight!"

He pulsed with an energy that would not let him be still or silent; he seemed vibrant and joyously mad with the sheer exuberance of life and the huge mirth of living. With gargantuan laughter he smote the table thunderously with his open hand and roared: "By Allah, *malik*, you shall help me celebrate my escape from that great oaf Baibars – whom the devil fly away with! Away with this slop, dogs! Bring kumiss! The Nazarene lord and I intend to hold such a drinking bout as Damietta's inns have not seen in a hundred years!"

"But my master has already emptied a full wine pitcher and is more than half drunk!" clamored the nondescript servant Cahal had picked up on the wharves – not that he cared, but whomever he served, he wished to have the best of any contest, and besides it was his Oriental instinct to intrude his say.

"So!" roared Haroun, catching up a full wine pitcher. "I will not take advantage of any man! See – I quaff this thimbleful that we may start on even terms!" And drinking deeply, he flung down the pitcher empty.

The servants of the inn brought kumiss – fermented mare's milk, in leathern skins, bound and sealed – illegal drink, brought down by the caravans from the lands of the Turkomans, to tempt the sated palates of

nobles, and to satisfy the craving of the steppesmen among the mercenaries and the Bahairiz.

Then, goblet for goblet with Haroun, Cahal quaffed the unfamiliar, whitish, acid stuff, and never had the exiled Irish prince seen such a cup-companion as this wanderer. For between enormous drafts, Haroun shook the smoke-stained rafters with giant laughter, and shouted over spicy tales that breathed the very scents of Cairo's merry obscenity and high comedy. He sang Arab love songs that sighed with the whisper of palm-leaves and the swish of silken veils, and he roared riding-songs in a tongue none in the tavern understood, but which vibrated with the drum of Mongol hoofs and the clashing of swords.

The moon had set and even the clamor of Damietta had ebbed in the darkness before dawn, when Haroun staggered up and clutched reeling at the table for support. A single weary slave stood by, to pour wine. Keeper, servants and guests snored on the floor or had slipped away long before. Haroun shouted a thick-tongued war-cry and yelled aloud with the sheer riotousness of his mirth. Sweat stood in beads on his face and the veins of his temples swelled and throbbed from his excesses. His wild wayward eyes danced with a joyous deviltry.

"Would you were not a king, *malik!*" he roared, catching up a stout bludgeon. "I would show you cudgel-play! Aye, my blood is racing like a Turkoman stallion and in good sport I would fain deal strong blows on somebody's pate, by Allah!"

"Then grip your stick, man," answered Cahal reeling up. "Men call me fool, but no man has ever said I was backward where blows were going, be they of steel or wood!"

Upsetting the table, he gripped a leg and wrenched powerfully. There was a splintering of wood, and the rough leg came away in his iron hand.

"Here is my cudgel, wanderer!" roared the Gael. "Let the breaking of heads begin and if the Prophet loves you, he'd best fling his mantle over your skull!"

"Salaam to you, *malik!*" yelled Haroun. "No other king since Malik Ric would take up cudgels with a masterless wanderer!" And with giant laughter, he lunged.

The fight was necessarily short and fierce. The wine they had drunk had made eye and hand uncertain, and their feet unsteady, but it had not robbed them of their tigerish strength. Haroun struck first, as a bear strikes, and it was by luck rather than skill that Cahal partly parried the whistling blow. Even so it fell glancingly above his ear, filling his vision with a myriad sparks of light, and knocking him back against the upset table. Cahal gripped the table edge with his left hand for support and struck back so savagely and swiftly that Haroun could neither duck nor parry. Blood spattered, the cudgel splintered in Cahal's hand and the Traveller dropped like a log, to lie motionless.

Cahal flung aside his cudgel with a motion of disgust and shook his head violently to clear it.

"Neither of us would yield to the other – well, in this I have prevailed – "

He stopped. Haroun lay sprawled serenely and a sound of placid snoring rose on the air. Cahal's blow had laid open his scalp and felled him, but it was the incredible amount of liquor the Tatar had drunk that had caused him to lie where he had fallen. And now Cahal knew that if he did not get out into the cool night air at once, he too would fall senseless beside Haroun.

Cursing himself disgustedly, he kicked his servant awake and gathering up shield, helmet and cloak, staggered out of the inn. Great white clusters of stars hung over the flat roofs of Damietta, reflected in the black lapping waves of the river. Dogs and beggars slept in the dust of the street, and in the black shadows of the crooked alleys not even a thief stole. Cahal swung into the saddle of the horse the sleepy servant brought, and reined his way through the winding silent streets. A cold wind, forerunner of dawn, cleared away the fumes of the wine as he rode out of the tangle of alleys and bazaars. Dawn was not yet whitening the east, but the tang of dawn was in the air.

Past the flat-topped mud huts along the irrigation ditches he rode, past the wells with their long wooden sweeps and deep clumps of palms. Behind him the ancient city slumbered, shadowy, mysterious, alluring. Before him stretched the sands of the Jifar.

II

The Bedouins did not cut Red Cahal's throat on the road from Damietta to Ascalon. He was preserved for a different destiny and so he rode, careless, and alone except for his ragamuffin servant, across the wastelands, and no barbed arrow or curved blade touched him, though a band of hawk-like riders in floating white khalats harried him the last part of the way and followed him like a wolf-pack to the very gates of the Christian outposts.

It was a restless and unquiet land through which Red Cahal rode on his pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the warm spring days of that year 1243. The red-haired prince learned much that was new to him, of the land which had been but a vague haze of disconnected names and events in his mind when he started on his exiled pilgrimage. He had known that the Emperor Frederick II had regained Jerusalem from the infidels without fighting a battle. Now he learned that the Holy City was shared with the Moslems – to whom it likewise was holy; Al Kuds, the Holy, they called it, for from thence, they said, Muhammad ascended to paradise, and there on the last day would he sit in judgment on the souls of men.

And Cahal learned that the kingdom of Outremer was but a shadow of an heroic past. In the north Bohemund VI held Antioch and Tripoli. In the south Christendom held the coast as far as Ascalon, with some inland towns such as Hebron, Bethlehem, and Ramlah. The grim castles of the Templars and of the Knights of St. John loomed like watchdogs above the land and the fierce soldier-monks wore arms day and night, ready to ride to any part of the kingdom threatened by pagan invasion. But how long could that thin line of ramparts and men along the coast stand against the growing pressure of the heathen hinterlands?

In the talk of castle and tavern, as he rode toward Jerusalem, Cahal heard again the name of Baibars. Men said the sultan of Egypt, kin of the great Saladin, was in his dotage, ruled by the girl-slave, Shadjar ad Darr, and that sharing her rule were the war-chiefs, Ae Beg the Kurd, and Baibars the Panther. This Baibars was a devil in human form, men said – a guzzler of wine and a lover of women; yet his wits were as keen as a monk's and his prowess in battle was the subject of many songs among the Arab minstrels. A strong man, and ambitious.

He was generalissimo of the mercenaries, men said, who were the real strength of the Egyptian army – Bahairiz, some called them, others the White Slaves of the River, the memluks. This host was, in the main, composed of Turkish slaves, raised up in its ranks and trained only in the arts of war. Baibars himself had served as a common soldier in the ranks, rising to power by the sheer might of his arm. He could eat a roasted sheep at one meal, the Arab wanderers said, and though wine was forbidden the Faithful, it was well known that he had drunk all his officers under the table. He had been known to break a man's spine in his bare hands in a moment of rage, and when he rode into battle swinging his heavy scimitar, none could stand before him.

And if this incarnate devil came up out of the South with his cutthroats, how could the lords of Outremer stand against him, without the aid that war-torn and intrigue-racked Europe had ceased to send? Spies slipped among the Franks, learning their weaknesses, and it was said that Baibars himself had gained entrance into Bohemund's palace in the guise of a wandering teller-of-tales. He must be in league with the Evil One himself, this Egyptian chief. He loved to go among his people in disguise, it was said, and he ruthlessly slew any man who recognized him. A strange soul, full of wayward whims, yet ferocious as a tiger.

Yet it was not so much Baibars of whom the people talked, nor yet of Sultan Ismail, the Moslem lord of Damascus. There was a threat in the blue mysterious East which overshadowed both these nearer foes.

Cahal heard of a strange new terrible people, like a scourge out of the East – Mongols, or Tartars as the priests called them, swearing they were the veritable demons of Tartary, spoken of by the prophets of old. More than a score of years before they had burst like a sandstorm out of the East, trampling all in their path; Islam had crumpled before them and kings had been dashed into the dust. And as their chief, men named one Subotai, whom Haroun the Traveller, Cahal remembered, had claimed as sire.

Then the horde had turned its course and the Holy Land had been spared. The Mongols had drifted back into the limbo of the unknown East with their ox-tail standards, their lacquered armor, their kettledrums and their terrible bows, and men had almost forgotten them. But now of late years the vultures had circled again in the East, and from time to time news had trickled down through the hills of the Kurds, of the Turkoman clans flying in shattered rout before the yak-tail banners. Suppose the unconquerable

Horde should turn southward? Subotai had spared Palestine – but who knew the mind of Mangu Khan, whom the Arab wanderers named the present lord of the nomads?

So the people talked in the dreamy spring weather as Cahal rode to Jerusalem, seeking to forget the past, losing himself in the present; absorbing the spirit and traditions of the country and the people, picking up new languages with the characteristic facility of the Gael.

He journeyed to Hebron, and in the great cathedral of the Virgin at Bethlehem, knelt beside the crypt where candles burned to mark the birthplace of our fair Seigneur Christ. And he rode up to Jerusalem, with its ruined walls and its muezzins calling the adhan within earshot of the priests chanting beside the Sepulcher. Those walls had been destroyed by the Sultan of Damascus, years before.

Beyond the Via Dolorosa he saw the slender columns of the Al Aksa portals and was told Christian hands first shaped them. He was shown mosques that had once been Christian chapels, and was told that the gilded dome above the mosque of Omar covered a gray rock which was the Muhammadan holy of holies – the rock whence the Prophet ascended to paradise. Aye, and thereon, in the days of Israel, had Abraham stood, and the Ark of the Covenant had rested, and the Temple whence Christ drove the merchants; for the Rock was the pinnacle of Mount Moriah, one of the two mountains on which Jerusalem was built. But now the Moslem Dome of the Rock hid it from Christian view, and dervishes with naked swords stood night and day to bar the way of Unbelievers; though nominally the city was in Christian hands. And Cahal realized how weak the Franks of Outremer had grown.

He rode in the hills about the Holy City and stood on the Mount of Olives where Tancred had stood, nearly a hundred and fifty years before, for his first sight of Jerusalem. And he dreamed deep dim dreams of those old days when men first rode from the West strong with faith and eager with zeal, to found a kingdom of God.

Now men cut their neighbors' throats in the West and cried out beneath the heels of ambitious kings and greedy popes, and in their wars and cryings out, forgot that thin frontier where the remnants of a fading glory clung to their slender boundaries.

Through budding spring, hot summer and dreamy autumn, Red Cahal rode – following a blind pilgrimage that led even beyond Jerusalem and

whose goal he could not see or guess. Ascalon he tarried in, Tyre, Jaffa and Acre. He was visitor at the castles of the Military Orders. Walter de Brienne offered him a part in the rule of the fading kingdom, but Cahal shook his head and rode on. The throne he had never pressed had been snatched beyond his reach and no other earthly glory would suffice.

And so in the budding dream of a new spring he came to the castle of Renault d'Ibelin beyond the frontier.

III

The Sieur Renault was a cousin of the powerful crusading family of d'Ibelin which held its grim gray castles on the coast, but little of the fruits of conquest had fallen to him. A wanderer and adventurer, living by his wits and the edge of his sword, he had gotten more hard blows than gold. He was a tall lean man with hawk-eyes and a predatory nose. His mail was worn, his velvet cloak shabby and torn, the gems long gone from hilt of sword and dagger.

And the knight's hold was a haunt of poverty. The dry moat which encircled the castle was filled up in many places; the outer walls were mere heaps of crumbled stone. Weeds grew rank in the courtyard and over the filled-up well.

The chambers of the castle were dusty and bare, and the great desert spiders spun their webs on the cold stones. Lizards scampered across the broken flags and the tramp of mailed feet resounded eerily in the echoing emptiness. No merry villagers bearing grain and wine thronged the barren courts, and no gayly clad pages sang among the dusty corridors. For over half a century the keep had stood deserted, until d'lbelin had ridden across the Jordan to make it a reaver's hold. For the Sieur Renault, in the stress of poverty, had become no more than a bandit chief, raiding the caravans of the Moslems.

And now in the dim dusty tower of the crumbling hold, the knight in his shabby finery sat at wine with his guest.

“The tale of your betrayal is not entirely unknown to me, good sir,” said Renault – unbidden, for since that night of drunkenness in Damietta, Cahal had not spoken of his past. “Some word of affairs in Ireland has drifted into this isolated land. As one ruined adventurer to another, I bid you welcome. But I would like to hear the tale from your own lips.”

Cahal laughed mirthlessly and drank deeply.

“A tale soon told and best forgotten. I was a wanderer, living by my sword, robbed of my heritage before my birth. The English lords pretended to sympathize with my claim to the Irish throne. If I would aid them against the O’Neills, they would throw off their allegiance to Henry of England – would serve me as my barons. So swore William Fitzgerald and his peers. I am not an utter fool. They had not persuaded me so easily but for the Lady Elinor de Courcey, with her black hair and proud Norman eyes – who feigned love for me. Hell!

“Why draw out the tale? I fought for them – won wars for them. They tricked me and cast me aside. I went into battle for the throne with less than a thousand men. Their bones rot in the hills of Donegal and better had I died there – but my kerns bore me senseless from the field. And then my own clan cast me forth.

“I took the cross – after I cut the throat of William Fitzgerald among his own henchmen. Speak of it no more; my kingdom was clouds and moonmist. I seek forgetfulness – of lost ambition and the ghost of a dead love.”

“Stay here and raid the caravans with me,” suggested Renault.

Cahal shrugged his shoulders.

“It would not last, I fear. With but forty-five men-at-arms, you can not hold this pile of ruins long. I have seen that the old well is long choked and broken in, and the reservoirs shattered. In case of a siege you would have only the tanks you have built, filled with water you carry from the muddy spring outside the walls. They would last only a few days at most.”

“Poverty drives men to desperate deeds,” frankly admitted Renault. “Godfrey, first lord of Jerusalem, built this castle for an outpost in the days when his rule extended beyond Jordan. Saladin stormed and partly dismantled it, and since then it has housed only the bat and the jackal. I

made it my lair, from whence I raid the caravans which go down to Mecca, but the plunder has been scanty enough.

“My neighbor the Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad will inevitably wipe me out if I bide here long, though I have skirmished successfully with his riders and beat off a flying raid. He has sworn to hang my head on his tower, driven to madness by my raids on the Mecca pilgrims whom it is his obligation to protect.

“Well, I have another thing in mind. Look, I scratch a map on the table with my dagger-point. Here is this castle; here to the north is El Omad, the stronghold of the Shaykh Suleyman. Now look – far to the east I trace a wandering line – so. That is the great river Euphrates, which begins in the hills of Asia Minor and traverses the whole plain, joining at last with the Tigris and flowing into Bahr el Fars – the Persian Gulf – below Bassorah. Thus – I trace the Tigris.

“Now where I make this mark beside the river Tigris stands Mosul of the Persians. Beyond Mosul lies an unknown land of deserts and mountains, but among those mountains there is a city called Shahazar, the treasure-trove of the sultans. There the lords of the East send their gold and jewels for safekeeping, and the city is ruled by a cult of warriors sworn to safeguard the treasures. The gates are kept bolted night and day, and no caravans pass out of the city. It is a secret place of wealth and pleasure and the Moslems seek to keep word of it from Christian ears. Now it is my mind to desert this ruin and ride east in quest of that city!”

Cahal smiled in admiration of the splendid madness, but shook his head.

“If it is as well guarded as you say, how could a handful of men hope to take it, even if they win through the hostile country which lies between?”

“Because a handful of Franks *has* taken it,” retorted d’Ibelin. “Nearly half a century ago the adventurer Cormac FitzGeoffrey raided Shahazar among the mountains and bore away untold plunder. What he did, another can do. Of course, it is madness; the chances are all that the Kurds will cut our throats before we ever see the banks of the Euphrates. But we will ride swiftly – and then, the Moslems may be so engaged with the Mongols, a small, hard-riding band might slip through. We will ride ahead of the news of our coming, and smite Shahazar as a whirlwind smites. Lord Cahal, shall we sit supine until Baibars comes up out of Egypt and cuts all our throats, or shall we cast the dice of chance to loot the eagle’s eyrie under the nose of Moslem and Mongol alike?”

Cahal’s cold eyes gleamed and he laughed aloud as the lurking madness in his soul responded to the madness of the proposal. His hard hand smote against the brown palm of Renault d’Ibelin.

“Doom hovers over all Outremer, and Death is no grimmer met on a mad quest than in the locked spears of battle! East we ride to the Devil knows what doom!”

The sun had scarce set when Cahal’s ragged servant, who had followed him faithfully through all his previous wanderings, stole away from the ruined walls and rode toward Jordan, flogging his shaggy pony hard. The madness of his master was no affair of his and life was sweet, even to a Cairo gutter-waif.

The first stars were blinking when Renault d’Ibelin and Red Cahal rode down the slope at the head of the men-at-arms. A hard-bitten lot these were, lean taciturn fighters, born in Outremer for the most part – a few veterans of Normandy and the Rhineland who had followed wandering lords into the Holy Land and had remained. They were well armed – clad in chain-mail shirts and steel caps, bearing kite-shaped shields. They rode fleet Arab horses and tall Turkoman steeds, and led horses followed. It was the capture of a number of fine steeds which had crystallized the idea of the raid in Renault’s mind.

D’Ibelin had long learned the lesson of the East – swift marches that went ahead of the news of the raid, and depended on the quality of the mounts. Yet he knew the whole plan was madness. Cahal and Renault rode into the unknown land and far in the east the vultures circled endlessly.

IV

The bearded watcher on the tower above the gates of El Omad shaded his hawk-eyes. In the east a dust-cloud grew and out of the cloud a black dot came flying. And the lean Arab knew it was a lone horseman, riding hard. He shouted a warning and in an instant other lean, hawk-eyed figures were at his side, brown fingers toying with bow-string and cane-shafted spear. They watched the approaching figure with the intentness of men born to feud and raid.

"A Frank," grunted one, "and on a dying horse."

They watched tensely as the lone rider dipped out of sight in a dry wadi, came into view again on the near side, clattered reelingly across the dusty level and drew rein beneath the gate. A lean hand drew shaft to ear, but a word from the first watcher halted the archer. The Frank below had half climbed, half fallen from his reeling horse, and now he staggered to the gate and smote against it resoundingly with his mailed fist.

"By Allah and by Allah!" swore the bearded watcher in wonder. "The Nazarene is mad!" He leaned over the battlement and shouted: "Oh, dead man, what wouldst thou at the gate of El Omad?"

The Frank looked up with eyes glazed from thirst and the burning winds of the desert. His mail was white with the drifting dust, with which likewise his lips were parched and caked. He spoke with difficulty.

"Open the gates, dog, lest ill befall you!"

"It is Kizil Malik – the Red King – whom men call The Mad," whispered an archer. "He rode with the lord Renault, the shepherds say. Hold him in play while I fetch the Shaykh."

"Art thou weary of life, Nazarene," called the first speaker, "that thou comest to the gate of thine enemy?"

"Fetch the lord of the castle, dog," roared the Gael. "I parley not with menials – and my horse is dying."

The tall lean form of Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad loomed among the guardsmen and the old chief swore in his beard.

"By Allah, this is a trap of some sort. Nazarene, what do ye here?"

Cahal licked his blackened lips with a dry tongue.

"When the wild dogs run, panther and buffalo flee together," he said. "Doom rushes from the east on Moslem and Christian alike. I bring you

warning – call in your vassals and make fast your gates, lest another rising sun find you sleeping among the charred embers of your hold. I claim the courtesy due a perishing traveller – and my horse is dying."

"It is no trap," growled the Shaykh in his beard. "The Frank has a tale – there has been a harrying in the east and perchance the Mongols are upon us – open the gates, dogs, and let him in."

Through the opened gates Cahal unsteadily led his drooping steed, and his first words gained him esteem among the Arabs.

"See to my horse," he mumbled, and willing hands complied.

Cahal stumbled to a horse block and sank down, his head in his hands. A slave gave him a flagon of water and he drank avidly. As he set down the flagon he was aware that the Shaykh had come from the tower and stood before him. Suleyman's keen eyes ran over the Gael from head to foot, noting the lines of weariness on his face, the dust that caked his mail, the fresh dints on helmet and shield – black dried blood was caked thick about the mouth of his scabbard, showing he had sheathed his sword without pausing to cleanse it.

"You have fought hard and fled swiftly," concluded Suleyman aloud.

"Aye, by the Saints!" laughed the prince. "I have fled for a night and a day and a night without rest. This horse is the third which has fallen under me – "

"Whom do you flee?"

"A horde that must have ridden up from the dim limbo of Hell! Wild riders with tall fur caps and the heads of wolves on their standards."

"Allah il Allah!" swore Suleyman. "Kharesmians! – flying before the Mongols!"

"They were apparently fleeing some greater horde," answered Cahal. "Let me tell the tale swiftly – the Sieur Renault and I rode east with all his men, seeking the fabled city of Shahazar – "

"So that was the quest!" interrupted Suleyman. "Well, I was preparing to sweep down and stamp out that robbers' nest when divers herdsmen brought me word that the bandits had ridden away swiftly in the night like the thieves they were. I could have ridden after, but knew that Christians riding eastward but rode to their doom – and none can alter the will of Allah."

"Aye," grinned Cahal wolfishly, "east to our doom we rode, like men riding blind into the teeth of a storm. We slashed our way through the lands

of the Kurds and crossed the Euphrates. Beyond, far to the east, we saw smoke and flame and the wheeling of many vultures, and Renault said the Turkomans fought the Horde. But we met no fugitives and I wondered then – I wonder not now. The slayers rode over them like a wave out of the night and none was left to flee.

"Like men riding to death in a dream, we rode into the onrushing storm and the suddenness of its coming was like a thunderbolt. A sudden drum of hoofs over a ridge and they were upon us – hundreds of them, a swarm of outriders scouting ahead of the horde. There was no chance to flee – our men died where they stood."

"And the Sieur Renault?" asked the Shaykh.

"Dead!" said Cahal. "I saw a curved blade cleave his helmet and his skull."

"Allah be merciful and save his soul from the hell-fire of the unbelievers!" piously exclaimed Suleyman, who had sworn to kill the luckless adventurer on sight.

"He took toll before he fell," grimly answered the Gael. "By God, the heathen lay like ripe grain beneath our horses' hoofs before the last man fell. I alone hacked my way through."

The Shaykh, grown old in warfare, visualized the scene that lay behind that simple sentence – the swarming, howling, fur-clad horsemen with their barbaric war cries, and Red Cahal riding like a wind of Death through that maelstrom of flashing blades, his sword singing in his hand as horse and rider went down before him.

"I outstripped the pursuers," said Cahal, "and as I rode over a hill I looked back and saw the great black mass of the horde swarming like locusts over the land, filling the sky with the clamor of their kettledrums. The Turkomans had risen behind us as we had raced through their lands, and now the desert was alive with horsemen – but the whole east was aflame and the tribesmen had no time to hunt down a single rider. They were faced with a stronger foe. So I won through.

"My horse fell under me, but I stole a steed from a herd watched by a Turkoman boy. When it could do no more, I took a mount from a wandering Kurd who rode up, thinking to loot a dying traveller. And now I say to you, whom men dub the Watcher of the Trail – beware, lest these demons from the east ride over your ruins as they have ridden over the corpses of the Turkomans. I do not think they'll lay siege – they are like wolves ranging

the steppes; they strike and pass on. But they ride like the wind. They have crossed the Euphrates. Behind me last night the sky was red as blood. Hard as I have ridden, they must be close on my heels."

"Let them come," grimly answered the Arab. "El Omad has held out against Nazarene, Kurd and Turk – for a hundred years no foe has set foot within these walls. *Malik*, this is a time when Christian and Moslem should join hands. I thank you for your warning, and beg you to aid me in holding the walls."

But Cahal shook his head.

"You will not need my help, and I have other work to do. It was not to save my worthless life that I have ridden three noble steeds to death – otherwise I had left my body beside Renault d'Ibelin. I must ride on; Jerusalem is in the path of these devils, with its ruined walls and scanty guard."

Suleyman paled and plucked his beard.

"Al Kuds! These pagan dogs will slay Christian and Muhammadan alike, and desecrate the holy places!"

"And so," Cahal rose stiffly, "I must on to warn them. So swiftly have these Kharesmians come that no word of their coming can have gone into Palestine. On me alone the burden of warning lies. Give me a fleet horse and let me go."

"You can do no more," objected Suleyman. "You are foredone – an hour more and you would drop senseless from the saddle. I will send one of my men instead – "

Cahal shook his head. "The duty is mine. Yet I will sleep an hour – one small hour can make no great difference. Then I will fare on."

"Come to my couch," urged Suleyman, but the hardy Gael shook his head.

"This has been my couch before," said he, and flinging himself down on the scanty grass of the courtyard, he drew his cloak about him and fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion. Yet he slept but an hour when he awoke of his own accord. Food and wine were placed before him and he drank and ate ravenously. His features were still drawn and haggard, but in his short rest he had drawn upon hidden springs of endurance. An iron man in an age of iron, he added to his physical ruggedness a dynamic nerve-energy that carried him beyond himself and upheld him after more stolid men had dropped by the wayside.

As he reined out of the gates on a swift Arab steed, the watchmen shouted and pointed to the east where a pillar of smoke billowed up against the hot blue sky. The Shaykh flung up his arm in salute as Cahal rode toward Jerusalem at a swinging gallop that ate up the miles.

Bedouins in their black felt tents gaped at him; herdsmen leaning on their staves stiffened at his shout. A rising drum of hoofs, the wave of a mailed arm, a shouted warning, then the dwindling hoof-beats – behind him the frenzied people snatched up their belongings and fled shrieking to places of shelter or hiding.

V

The moon was setting as Cahal splashed through the calm waters of the Jordan, flecked with the mirrored stars. The sun was rising when his horse fell at the gate of Jerusalem that opens on the Damascus road. Cahal staggered up, half dead himself, and gazing on the crumbling ruins of the shattered walls, he groaned aloud. On foot he hurried forward and a group of placid Syrians watched him curiously. A bearded Flemish man-at-arms came forward, trailing his pike. Cahal snatched a wine-flask that hung at the soldier's girdle and emptied it at one draft.

"Lead me to the patriarch," he gasped throatily. "Doom rides on swift hoofs to Jerusalem – ha!"

From the people a thin cry of wonder and fear had gone up – Cahal wheeled and felt fear constrict his throat. Again in the east he saw flying flame and drifting smoke – the gigantic tracks of the destroying horde.

"They have crossed the Jordan!" he cried. "Saints of God, when did men born of women ride so madly? They spurn the very wind – curst be the weakness that made me waste even a single hour – "

The words died in his throat as he looked at the ruined walls. Truly, an hour more or less could have no significance in that doomed city.

Cahal hurried through the streets with the soldier and he saw that already the word had spread like wild-fire. Jews in their blue shubas ran about howling; in the streets and on the house-tops women wrung their white hands and wailed. Tall Syrians bound their belongings on donkeys and formed the nucleus of a disorderly horde that streamed out of the western gates staggering under bundles of household goods. The city crouched trembling and dazed with terror under the threat rising in the east. What horde was sweeping upon them they did not know, nor care; death is death, whoever the dealer.

Some cried out that the Tartars were upon them and both Moslem and Nazarene shook. Cahal found the patriarch bewildered and helpless. With a handful of soldiers, how could he defend the wallless city? He was ready to give up his life in the vain attempt; he could do no more. The mullahs rallied their people, and for the first time in all history Moslem and Christian joined forces to defend the city that was holy to both. The great mass of the people fled into the mosques or the cathedrals, or crouched

resignedly in the streets, dumbly awaiting the stroke. Men cried on Jehovah and on Allah, and some prophesied a miracle that should deliver the Holy City. But in the merciless blue sky no flaming sword appeared, only the smoke of the pillaging, the flame of the slaughter and at last the dust clouds of the riders.

The patriarch had bunched his pitiful force of men-at-arms, knights, armed pilgrims and Moslems, at the Damascus Gate. Useless to man the ruined walls. There they would face the horde and give up their lives, without hope and without fear.

Cahal, his weariness half forgotten in the drunkenness of anticipated battle, reined beside the patriarch on the great red stallion that had been given him, and cried out suddenly at the sight of a tall, broad man on a rangy Turkish bay.

“Haroun, by all the Saints!”

The other turned toward him and Cahal wavered. Was this Haroun? The fellow was clad in the mail shirt and peaked helmet of a Turkish soldier. On his brawny right arm he bore a round spiked buckler and at his belt hung a long broad scimitar, heavier by pounds than the average Moslem blade. Moreover, Haroun had been clean-shaven and this man wore the fierce curving mustachios of the Turk. Yet the build of him – that square dark face – those blazing blue eyes –

“By the Saints, Haroun,” said Cahal heartily, “what do you here?”

“Allah blast me if I be any Haroun,” answered the soldier in a deep growling voice. “I am Akbar the Soldier, come to Al Kuds on pilgrimage. You have mistaken me for another.”

Cahal frowned. The voice was not even that of Haroun, yet surely in all the world there was not such another pair of eyes. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, it is of no moment – where are you going?”

For the man had reined about.

“To the hills!” answered the soldier. “We can do no good by dying here – best come with me. From the dust, it is a whole horde that is riding upon us.”

“Flee without striking a blow? Not I!” snapped Cahal. “Go, if you fear.”

Akbar swore loudly. “By Allah and by Allah! A man had better place his head beneath an elephant’s tread than call me coward! I’ll stand my ground as long as any Nazarene!”

Cahal turned away shortly, irritated by the fellow’s manner and by his boasting. Yet for all the soldier’s wrath, it seemed to the Gael that a vagrant twinkle lighted his fierce eyes as though he shook with inward mirth. Then Cahal forgot him. A wail went up from the house-tops where the helpless people watched their oncoming doom. The horde had swept into sight, up from the hazes of the Jordan’s gorge.

The skies shook with the clamor of the kettledrums; the earth trembled with the thunder of the hoofs. The headlong speed of the yelling fiends numbed the minds of their victims. From the steppes of high Asia these barbarians had fled before the Mongols like thistle-down flying before the wind. Drunken with the blood of slaughtered tribes, ten thousand strong they surged on Jerusalem, where thousands of helpless folk knelt shuddering.

Cahal saw anew the hideous figures which had haunted his half-delirious dreams as he swayed in the saddle on that long flight: tall rangy steeds on which crouched the broad forms of the riders in wolfskins and mail – square dark faces, eyes glaring like mad dogs’ from beneath high fur caps or peaked helmets; standards with the heads of wolves, panthers and bears.

Headlong they swept down the Damascus road – leaping their horses over the broken walls, crowding through the ruined gates at breakneck speed – and headlong they smote the clump of defenders which spurred to meet them – smote them, broke them, shattered them, trampled them down and under, and over their mangled bodies, struck the heart of the doomed city.

Red hell reigned rampant in the streets of Jerusalem, where helpless men, women and children ran screaming before the slayers who rode them down, howling like wolves, spitting babes on their lances and holding them on high like gory standards. Under the frenzied hoofs pitiful forms fell writhing and blood flooded the gutters. Dark blood-stained hands tore the

garments from shrieking girls and lance-butts shattered doors and windows behind which cowered terrified prey. All objects of worth were ripped from their places and screams of agony rose to the smoke-fouled heavens as the victims were tortured with steel and fire to make them give up their pitiful treasures. Death stalked howling through the streets of Jerusalem and men blasphemed their gods as they died.

In the first irresistible flood of that charge, such defenders as were not instantly ridden down had been torn apart and swept back in utter confusion. The weight of the impact had swept Red Cahal's steed away as on the crest of a flood, and he found himself reining about in a narrow alley, where he had been tossed as a bit of driftwood is flung into a back-eddy by a rushing tide. He had lost sight of the patriarch and had no doubt that he lay among the trampled dead before the Damascus Gate.

His sword was red to the hilt, his soul ablaze with the battle-lust, his brain sick with fury and horror as the cries of the butchered city smote on his ears.

"I'll leave my corpse before the Sepulcher," he growled, and wheeling, spurred up the alley. He raced down a narrow winding street and emerged upon the Via Dolorosa just as the first Kharesmian came flying along it, scimitar dripping crimson. The red stallion's shoulder brushed the barbarian's stirrup and Cahal's sword flashed like a sunburst. The Kharesmian's head leaped from his shoulders on an arch of crimson and the Gael yelped with murderous exultation.

And now came another riding like the wind, and Cahal saw it was Akbar. The soldier reined in and shouted, "Well, good sir, are you still determined to sacrifice both our lives?"

"Your life is your own – my life is mine!" roared Cahal, eyes blazing.

He saw that a group of horsemen had ridden up to the Sepulcher from another street and were dismounting, shouting in their barbaric tongue, spattering the holy stones with blood-drops from their blades. In a red mist of fury Cahal smote them as an avalanche smites the pines. His whistling sword cleft buckler and helmet, severing necks and splitting skulls; under the hammering hoofs of his screaming charger, men rolled with smashed heads. And even in his madness Cahal was aware that he was not alone. Akbar had charged after him; his great voice roared above the clamor and the heavy scimitar in his left hand crashed through mail and flesh and bone.

The men before the Sepulcher lay in a silent gory heap when Cahal reined back and shook the bloody mist from his eyes. Akbar roared in a strange tongue and smote him thunderously on the shoulders.

"Bogda, bogatyr!" he roared, his eyes dancing, and no longer Cahal doubted that he was Haroun. "You fight like a hero, by Erlik! But come, *malik* – you have offered a noble sacrifice to your God and He'll hardly blame you for saving yourself now. Thunder of Allah, man, we can not fight ten thousand!"

"Ride on," answered Cahal, shaking the red drops from his blade. "Here I die."

"Well," laughed Akbar, "if you wish to throw away your life here where it will do no good – that's your affair! The heathen may thank you, but your brothers scarcely will, when the raiders smite them suddenly! The horsemen are all dead or hemmed in the alleys. Only you and I escaped that charge. Who will carry the news of the raid to the Frankish barons?"

"You speak truth," said Cahal shortly. "Let us go."

The pair wheeled away and galloped down the street just as a howling horde came flying up the other end. Beyond the shattered walls Cahal looked back to see a mounting flame. He hid his face in his hands.

"Wounds of God!" he groaned. "They are burning the Sepulcher!"

"And defiling the Al Aksa mosque too, I doubt not," said Akbar tranquilly. "Well, that which is written will come to pass, and no man may escape his fate. All things pass away, yea, even the Holy of Holies."

Cahal shook his head, soul-sick. They rode through toiling bands of fugitives who screamed and caught at his stirrups, but Cahal steeled his heart. If he was to bear warning to the barons, he could not be burdened by helpless ones.

The roar of pillage and slaughter faded into the distance; only the smoke stood up among the hills, mute witness of the horror. Akbar laughed gustily.

"By Allah!" he swore, smiting his saddlebow, "these Kharesmians are woundy fighters! They ride like Tatars and slay like Turks! Right well would I lead them into battle! I had rather fight beside them than against them."

Cahal made no reply. His strange companion seemed to him like a faun, a soulless fantastic being full of titanic laughter at all human things – a

creature outside the boundaries of men's dreams and reverences.

Akbar spoke abruptly. "Here our roads part for a space, *malik*; your road lies to Ascalon – mine to El Kahira."

"Why to Cairo, Akbar, or Haroun, or whatever your name is?" asked Cahal.

"Because I have business with that great oaf, Baibars, whom the devil fly away with!" yelled Akbar, and his shout of laughter floated back above the hoof-beats.

It was hours later when Cahal, pushing his horse as hard as he dared, met the travellers – a slender knight in full mail and vizored helmet, with a single attendant, a big carle with a rough red beard, who wore a horned helmet and a shirt of scale-mail and bore a heavy ax. Something slumbering stirred in Cahal as he looked on that fierce bluff face, and he reined in.

"Man, where have I seen you before?"

The fierce frosty eyes met his levelly.

"By Odin, that I can't say. I'm Wulfgar the Dane and this is my master."

Cahal glanced at the silent knight with his plain shield. Through the bars of the vizor, shadowed eyes looked at him – great God! A shock went through Cahal, leaving him bewildered and shaken with a thousand racing chaotic thoughts. He leaned forward, striving to peer through the lowered vizor, and the knight drew back with an almost womanish gesture of rebuke. Cahal reddened.

"I crave your pardon, sir," he said. "I did not intend this seeming rudeness."

"My master has taken a vow not to speak or reveal his features until he has accomplished his penance," broke in the rough Dane. "He is known as the Masked Knight. We journey to Jerusalem."

Sorrowfully Cahal shook his head.

"No Christian may ride thither. The paynim from the outer steppes have swept over the walls and the Holy of Holies lies in smoking ruins."

The Dane's bearded mouth gaped.

"Jerusalem – taken?" he mouthed stupidly. "Why, good sir, that can not be! How would God allow his Holy City to fall into the hands of the infidels?"

"I know not," said Cahal bitterly. "The ways of God and His infinite mercy are past my knowledge – but the streets of Jerusalem run with the

blood of His people and the Sepulcher is black with the flames of the heathen."

Perplexed, the Dane tugged at his red beard and glanced at his master, sitting image-like in the saddle.

"By Odin," he growled, "what are we to do now?"

"There is but one thing to be done," answered Cahal. "Ride back to Ascalon and give warning. I was going thither, but if you will do this thing, I will seek Walter de Brienne. Tell the Seneschal of Ascalon that Jerusalem has fallen to heathen Turks of the outer steppes, known as Kharesmians, who number some ten thousand men. Bid him arm for war – and let no grass grow under your horses' hoofs in going."

And Cahal reined aside and took the road for Jaffa.

VI

Cahal found Walter de Brienne in Ramlah, brooding in the White Mosque over the sepulcher of Saint George. Fainting with weariness the Gael told his tale in a few stark bare words, and even they seemed to drag leaden and lifeless from his blackened lips. He was but dimly aware that men led him into a house and laid him on a couch. And there he slept the sun around.

He woke to a deserted city. Horror-stricken, the people of Ramlah had gathered up their belongings and fled along the road to Jaffa, crying that the end of the world was come. But Walter de Brienne had ridden north, leaving a single man-at-arms to bid Cahal follow him to Acre. The Gael rode through the hollow-echoing streets, feeling like a ghost in a dead city. The western gates swung idly open and a spear lay on the worn flags, as if the watch had dropped their weapons and fled in sudden panic.

Cahal rode through the fields of date-palms and groves of fig-trees hugging the shadow of the wall, and out on the plain he overtook staggering crowds of frantic folk burdened with their goods and crying with weariness and thirst. When the fugitives saw Cahal they screamed with fear to know if the slayers were upon them. He shook his head, pushing through. It seemed logical to him that the Kharesmians would sweep on to the sea, and their path might well take them by Ramlah. But as he rode he scanned the horizon behind him and saw neither smoke-rack nor dust cloud.

He left the Jaffa road with its hurrying throngs, and swung north. Already the tale had passed like wildfire from mouth to mouth. The villages were deserted as the folk thronged to the coast towns or retired into towers on the heights. Christian Outremer stood with its back to the sea, facing the onrushing menace out of the East.

Cahal rode into Acre, where the waning powers of Outremer were already gathering – hawk-eyed knights in worn mail – the barons with their wolfish men-at-arms. Sultan Ismail of Damascus had sent swift emissaries urging an alliance – which had been quickly accepted. Knights of St. John from their great grim Krak des Chevaliers, Templars with their red skull-caps and untrimmed beards rode in from all parts of the kingdom – the grim silent watchdogs of Outremer.

Survivors had drifted into Ascalon and Jaffa – lame, weary folk, a bare handful who had escaped the torch and sword and survived the hardships of

the flight. They told tales of horror. Seven thousand Christians, mostly women and children, had perished in the sack of Jerusalem. The Holy Sepulcher had been blackened by flame, the altars of the city shattered, the shrines burned with fire. Moslem had suffered with Christian. The patriarch was among the fugitives – saved from death by the valor and faithfulness of a nameless Rhinelander man-at-arms, who hid a cruel wound until he said, “Yonder be the towers of Ascalon, master, and since you have no more need o’ me, I’ll lie me down and sleep, for I be sore weary.” And he died in the dust of the road.

And word came of the Kharesmian horde; they had not tarried long in the broken city, but swept on, down through the deserts of the south, to Gaza, where they lay encamped at last after their long drift. And pregnant, mysterious hints floated up from the blue web of the South, and de Brienne sent for Cahal O’Donnel.

“Good sir,” said the baron, “my spies tell me that a host of memluks is advancing from Egypt. Their object is obvious – to take possession of the city the Kharesmians left desolate. But what else? There are hints of an alliance between the memluks and the nomads. If this be the case, we may as well be shriven before we go into battle, for we can not stand against both hosts.

“The men of Damascus cry out against the Kharesmians for befouling holy places – Moslem as well as Christian – but these memluks are of Turkish blood, and who knows the mind of Baibars, their master?

“Sir Cahal, will you ride to Baibars and parley with him? You saw with your own eyes the sack of Jerusalem and can tell him the truth of how the pagans befouled Al Aksa as well as the Sepulcher. After all, he is a Moslem. At least learn if he means to join hands with these devils.

“Tomorrow, when the cohorts of Damascus come up, we advance southward to go against the foe ere he can come against us. Ride you ahead of the host as an emissary under a flag of truce, with as many men as you wish.”

“Give me the flag,” said Cahal. “I’ll ride alone.”

He rode out of the camp before sunset on a palfrey, bearing the flag of peace and without his sword. Only a battle-ax hung at his saddlebow as a precaution against bandits who respected no flag, as he rode south through a

half-deserted land. He guided his course by the words of the wandering Arab herdsmen who knew all things that went on in the land. And beyond Ascalon he learned that the host had crossed the Jifar and was encamped to the southeast of Gaza. The close proximity to the Kharesmians made him wary and he swung far to the east to avoid any scouts of the pagans who might be combing the countryside. He had no trust in the peace-token as a safeguard against the barbarians.

He rode, in a dreamy twilight, into the Egyptian camp which lay about a cluster of wells a bare league from Gaza. Misgivings smote him as he noted their arms, their numbers, their evident discipline. He dismounted, displaying the peace-gonfalon and his empty sword-belt. The wild memluks in their silvered mail and heron feathers swarmed about him in sinister silence, as if minded to try their curved blades on his flesh, but they escorted him to a spacious silk pavilion in the midst of the camp.

Black slaves with wide-tipped scimitars stood ranged about the entrance and from within a great voice – strangely familiar – boomed a song.

"This is the pavilion of the amir, even Baibars the Panther, *Caphar*," growled a bearded Turk, and Cahal said as haughtily as if he sat on his lost throne amid his gallaglachs, "Lead me to your lord, dog, and announce me with due respect."

The eyes of the gaudily clad ruffian fell sullenly, and with a reluctant salaam he obeyed. Cahal strode into the silken tent and heard the memluk boom: "The lord Kizil Malik, emissary from the barons of Palestine!"

In the great pavilion a single huge candle on a lacquered table shed a golden light; the chiefs of Egypt sprawled about on silken cushions, quaffing the forbidden wine. And dominating the scene, a tall broad figure in voluminous silken trousers, satin vest, a broad cloth-of-gold girdle – without a doubt Baibars, the ogre of the South. And Cahal caught his breath – that coarse red hair – that square dark face – those blazing blue eyes –

"I bid you welcome, lord *Caphar*," boomed Baibars. "What news do you bring?"

"You were Haroun the Traveller," said Cahal slowly, "and at Jerusalem you were Akbar the Soldier."

Baibars rocked with laughter.

"By Allah!" he roared, "I bear a scar on my head to this day as a relic of that night's bout in Damietta! By Allah, you gave me a woundy clout!"

“You play your parts like a mummer,” said Cahal. “But what reason for these deceptions?”

“Well,” said Baibars, “I trust no spy but myself, for one thing. For another it makes life worth living. I did not lie when I told you that night in Damietta that I was celebrating my escape from Baibars. By Allah, the affairs of the world weigh heavily on Baibars’ shoulders, but Haroun the Traveller, he is a mad and merry rogue with a free mind and a roving foot. I play the mummer and escape from myself, and try to be true to each part – so long as I play it. Sit ye and drink!”

Cahal shook his head. All his carefully thought out plans of diplomacy fell away, futile as dust. He struck straight and spoke bluntly and to the point.

“A word and my task is done, Baibars,” he said. “I come to find whether you mean to join hands with the pagans who desecrated the Sepulcher – and Al Aksa.”

Baibars drank and considered, though Cahal knew well that the Tatar had already made up his mind, long before.

“Al Kuds is mine for the taking,” he said lazily. “I will cleanse the mosques – aye, by Allah, the Kharesmians shall do the work, most piously. They’ll make good Moslems. And winged war-men. With them I sow the thunder – who reaps the tempest?”

“Yet you fought against them at Jerusalem,” Cahal reminded bitterly.

“Aye,” frankly admitted the amir, “but there they would have cut my throat as quick as any Frank’s. I could not say to them: ‘Hold, dogs, I am Baibars!’ ”

Cahal bowed his lion-like head, knowing the futility of arguing.

“Then my work is done; I demand safe-conduct from your camp.”

Baibars shook his head, grinning. “Nay, *malik*, you are thirsty and weary. Bide here as my guest.”

Cahal’s hand moved involuntarily toward his empty girdle. Baibars was smiling but his eyes glittered between narrowed lids and the slaves about him half-drew their scimitars.

“You’d keep me prisoner despite the fact I am an ambassador?”

“You came without invitation,” grinned Baibars. “I ask no parley. Di Zaro!”

A tall lank Venetian in black velvet stepped forward.

“Di Zaro,” said Baibars in a jesting voice, “the *malik* Cahal is our guest. Mount ye and ride like the devil to the host of the Franks. There say that Cahal sent you secretly. Say that the lord Cahal is twisting that great fool Baibars about his finger, and pledges to keep him aloof from the battle.”

The Venetian grinned bleakly and left the tent, avoiding Cahal’s smoldering eyes. The Gael knew that the trade-lusting Italians were often in secret league with the Moslems, but few stooped so low as this renegade.

“Well, Baibars,” said Cahal with a shrug of his shoulders, “since you must play the dog, there is naught I can do. I have no sword.”

“I’m glad of that,” responded Baibars candidly. “Come, fret not. It is but your misfortune to oppose Baibars and his destiny. Men are my tools – at the Damascus Gate I knew that those red-handed riders were steel to forge into a Moslem sword. By Allah, *malik*, if you could have seen me riding like the wind into Egypt – marching back across the Jifar without pausing to rest! Riding into the camp of the pagans with mullahs shouting the advantages of Islam! Convincing their wild Kuran Shah that his only safety lay in conversion and alliance!

“I do not fully trust the wolves, and have pitched my camp apart from them – but when the Franks come up, they will find our hordes joined for battle – and should be horribly surprized, if that dog di Zaro does his work well!”

“Your treachery makes me a dog in the eyes of my people,” said Cahal bitterly.

“None will call you traitor,” said Baibars serenely, “because soon all will cease to be. Relics of an outworn age, I will rid the land of them. Be at ease!”

He extended a brimming goblet and Cahal took it, sipped at it absently, and began to pace up and down the pavilion, as a man paces in worry and despair. The memluks watched him, grinning surreptitiously.

“Well,” said Baibars, “I was a Tatar prince, I was a slave, and I will be a prince again. Kuran Shah’s shaman read the stars for me – and he says that if I win the battle against the Franks, I will be sultan of Egypt!”

The amir was sure of his chiefs, thought Cahal, to thus flaunt his ambition openly. The Gael said, “The Franks care not who is sultan of Egypt.”

“Aye, but battles and the corpses of men are stairs whereby I climb to fame. Each war I win clinches my hold on power. Now the Franks stand in

my path; I will brush them aside. But the shaman prophesied a strange thing – that a dead man's sword will deal me a grievous hurt when the Franks come up against us – "

From the corner of his eye Cahal saw that his apparently aimless strides had taken him close to the table on which stood the great candle. He lifted the goblet toward his lips, then with a lightning flick of his wrist, dashed the wine onto the flame. It sputtered and went out, plunging the tent into total darkness. And simultaneously Cahal ripped a hidden dirk from under his arm and like a steel spring released, bounded toward the place where he knew Baibars sat. He catapulted into somebody in the dark and his dirk hummed and sank home. A death scream ripped the clamor and the Gael wrenched the blade free and sprang away. No time for another stroke. Men yelled and fell over each other and steel clanged wildly. Cahal's crimsoned blade ripped a long slit in the silk of the tent-wall and he sprang into the outer starlight where men were shouting and running toward the pavilion.

Behind him a bull-like bellowing told the Gael that his blindly stabbing dirk had found some other flesh than Baibars'. He ran swiftly toward the horse-lines, leaping over taut tent-ropes, a shadow among a thousand racing figures. A mounted sentry came galloping through the confusion, firelight gleaming on his drawn scimitar. As a panther leaps Cahal sprang, landing behind the saddle. The memluk's startled yell broke in a gurgle as the keen dirk crossed his throat.

Flinging the corpse to the earth, the Gael quieted the snorting, plunging steed and reined it away. Like the wind he rode through the swarming camp and the free air of the desert struck his face. He gave the Arab horse the rein and heard the clamor of pursuit die away behind him. Somewhere to the north lay the slowly advancing host of the Christians, and Cahal rode north. He hoped to overtake the Venetian on the road, but the other had too long a start. Men who rode for Baibars rode with a flowing rein.

The Franks were breaking camp at dawn when a Venetian rode headlong into their lines, gasping a tale of escape and flight, and demanding to see de Brienne.

Within the baron's half-dismantled tent, di Zaro gasped: "The lord Cahal sent me, *seigneur* – he holds Baibars in parley. He gives his word that the memluks will not join the Kharesmians, and urges you to press forward – "

Outside a clatter of hoofs split the din – a lone rider whose flying hair was like a veil of blood against the crimson of dawn. At de Brienne's tent

the hard-checked steed slid to its haunches. Cahal leaped to the earth and rushed in like an avenging blast. Di Zaro cried out and paled, frozen by his doom – till Cahal's dirk split his heart and the Venetian rolled, an earthen-faced corpse, to Walter de Brienne's feet. The baron sprang up, bewildered.

"Cahal! What news, in God's name?"

"Baibars joins arms with the pagans," answered Cahal.

De Brienne bowed his head.

"Well – no man can ask to live forever."

VII

Through the drear gray dusty desert the host of Outremer crawled southward. The black and white standard of the Templars floated beside the cross of the patriarch, and the black banners of Damascus billowed in the faintly stirring air. No king led them. The Emperor Frederick claimed the kingship of Jerusalem and he skulked in Sicily, plotting against the pope. De Brienne had been chosen to lead the barons and he shared his command with Al Mansur el Haman, war-lord of Damascus.

They went into camp within sight of the Moslem outposts, and all night the wind that blew up from the south throbbed with the beat of drums and the clash of cymbals. Scouts reported the movements of the Kharesmian horde, and that the memluks had joined them.

In the gray light of dawn Red Cahal came from his tent fully armed. On all sides the host was moving, striking tents and buckling armor. In the illusive light Cahal saw them moving like phantoms – the tall patriarch, shriving and blessing; the giant form of the Master of the Temple among his grim war-dogs; the heron-feathered gold helmet of Al Mansur. And he stiffened as he saw a slim mailed shape moving through the swarm, followed close by a rough figure with ax on shoulder. Bewildered, he shook his head – why did his heart pound so strangely at sight of that mysterious Masked Knight? Of whom did the slim youth remind him, and of what dim bitter memories? He felt as one plunged into a web of illusion.

And now a familiar figure fell upon Cahal and embraced him.

“By Allah!” swore Shaykh Suleyman ibn Omad, “but for thee I had slept in the ruins of my keep! They came like the wind, those dogs, but they found the gates closed, the archers on the walls – and after one assault, they passed on to easier prey! Ride with me this day, my son!”

Cahal assented, liking the lean hearty old desert hawk. And so it was in the glittering, plume-helmeted ranks of Damascus the Gael rode to battle.

In the dawn they moved forward, no more than twelve thousand men to meet the memluks and nomads – fifteen thousand warriors, not counting light-armed irregulars. In the center of the right wing the Templars held their accustomed place, in advance of the rest; five hundred grim iron men, flanked on one side by the Knights of St. John and the Teutonic Knights, some three hundred in all; and on the other by the handful of barons with the patriarch and his iron mace. The combined forces of their men-at-arms did not exceed seven thousand. The rest of the host consisted of the cavalry of Damascus, in the center of the army, and the warriors of the amir of Kerak who held the left wing – lean hawk-faced Arabs better at raiding than at fighting pitched battles.

Now the desert blackened ahead of them with the swarms of their foes, and the drums throbbed and bellowed. The warriors of Damascus sang and chanted, but the men of the Cross were silent, like men riding to a known doom. Cahal, riding beside Al Mansur and Shaykh Suleyman, let his gaze sweep down those grim gray-mailed ranks, and found that which he sought. Again his heart leaped curiously at the sight of the slim Masked Knight, riding close to the patriarch. Close at the knight’s side bobbed the horned helmet of the Dane. Cahal cursed, bewilderedly.

And now both hosts advanced, the dark swarms of the desert riders moving ahead of the ordered ranks of the memluks. The Kharesmians trotted forward in some formation, and Cahal saw the Crusaders close their ranks to meet the charge, without slackening their even pace. The wild riders struck in the rowels and the dark swarm rolled swiftly across the sands; then suddenly they shifted as a crafty swordsman shifts. Wheeling in perfect order they swept past the front of the knights and bursting into a headlong run, thundered down on the banners of Damascus.

The trick, born in the brain of Baibars, took the whole allied host by surprize. The Arabs yelled and prepared to meet the onset, but they were

bewildered by the mad fury and numbing speed of that charge.

Riding like mad men the Kharesmians bent their heavy bows and shot from the saddle, and clouds of feathered shafts hummed before them. The leather bucklers and light mail of the Arabs were useless against those whistling missiles, and along the Damascus front warriors fell like ripe grain. Al Mansur was screaming commands for a counter-charge, but in the teeth of that deadly blast the dazed Arabs milled helplessly, and in the midst of the confusion, the charge crashed into their lines. Cahal saw again the broad squat figures, the wild dark faces, the madly hacking scimitars – broader and heavier than the light Damascus blades. He felt again the irresistible concussion of the Kharesmian charge.

His great red stallion staggered to the impact and a whistling blade shivered on his shield. He stood up in his stirrups, slashing right and left, and felt mail-mesh part under his edge, saw headless corpses drop from their saddles. Up and down the line the blades were flashing like spray in the sun and the Damascus ranks were breaking and melting away. Man to man, the Arabs might have held fast; but dazed and outnumbered, that demoralizing rain of arrows had begun the rout that the curved swords completed.

Cahal, hurled back with the rest, vainly striving to hold his ground as he slashed and thrust, heard old Suleyman ibn Omad cursing like a fiend beside him as his scimitar wove a shining wheel of death about his head.

“Dogs and sons of dogs!” yelled the old hawk. “Had ye stood but a moment, the day had been yours! By Allah, pagan, will ye press me close? – so! ha! Now carry your head to Hell in your hand! Ho, children, rally to me and the lord Cahal! My son, keep at my side. The fight is already lost and we must hack clear.”

Suleyman’s hawks reined in about him and Cahal, and the compact little knot of desperate men slashed through, riding down the snarling wolfish shapes that barred their path, and so rode out of the red frenzy of the melee into the open desert. The Damascus clans were in full flight, their black banners streaming ingloriously behind them. Yet there was no shame to be attached to them. That unexpected charge had simply swept them away, like a shattered dam before a torrent.

On the left wing the amir of Kerak was giving back, his ranks crumbling before the singing arrows and flying blades of the tribesmen. So far the memluks had taken no part in the battle, but now they rode forward and

Cahal saw the huge form of Baibars galloping into the fray, beating the howling nomads from their flying prey and reforming their straggling lines. The wolfskin-clad riders swung about and trotted across the sands, reinforced by the memluks in their silvered mail and heron-feathered helmets. So suddenly had the storm burst that before the Franks could wheel their ponderous lines to support the center, their Arab allies were broken and flying. But the men of the Cross came doggedly onward.

"Now the real death-grip," grunted Suleyman, "with but one possible end. By Allah, my head was not made to dangle at a pagan's saddlebow. The road to the desert is open to us – ha, my son, are you mad?"

For Cahal wheeled away, jerking his rein from the clutching hand of the protesting Shaykh. Across the corpse-littered plain he galloped toward the gray-steel ranks that swept inexorably onward. Riding hard he swept into line just as the oliphants trumpeted for the onset. With a deep-throated roar the knights of the Cross charged to meet the onrushing hordes through a barbed and feathered cloud. Heads down, grimly facing the singing shafts that could not check them, the knights swept on in their last charge. With an earthquake shock the two hosts crashed together, and this time it was the Kharesmian horde which staggered.

The long lances of the Templars ripped their foremost line to shreds and the great chargers of the Crusaders overthrew horse and rider. Close on the heels of the warrior-monks thundered the rest of the Christian host, swords flashing. Dazed in their turn, the wild riders in their wolfskins reeled backward, howling and plying their deadly blades. But the long swords of the Europeans hacked through iron mesh and steel plate, to split skulls and bosoms. Squat corpses choked the ground under their horses' hoofs, as deep into the heart of the disorganized horde the knights slashed, and the yells of the tribesmen changed to howls of dismay as the whole battle-mass surged backward.

And now Baibars, seeing the battle tremble in the balance, deployed swiftly, skirted the ragged edge of the melee and hurled his memluks like a thunderbolt at the backs of the Crusaders. The fresh, unwearied Bahairiz struck home, and the Franks found themselves hemmed in on all sides, as the wavering Kharesmians stiffened and with a fresh resurge of confidence renewed the fight.

Leaguered all about, the Christians fell fast, but even in dying they took bitter toll. Back to back, in a slowly shrinking ring facing outward, about a rocky knoll on which was planted the patriarch’s cross, the last host of Outremer made its last stand.

Until the red stallion fell dying, Red Cahal fought in the saddle, and then he joined the ring of men on foot. In the berserk fury that gripped him, he felt not the sting of wounds. Time faded in an eternity of plunging bodies and frantic steel; of chaotic, wild figures that smote and died. In a red maze he saw a gold-mailed figure roll under his sword, and knew, in a brief passing flash of triumph, that he had slain Kuran Shah, khan of the horde. And remembering Jerusalem, he ground the dying face under his mailed heel. And the grim fight raged on. Beside Cahal fell the grim Master of the Temple, the Seneschal of Ascalon, the lord of Acre. The thin ring of defenders staggered beneath the repeated charges; blood blinded them, the heat of the sun smote fierce upon them, they were choked with dust and maddened with wounds. Yet with broken swords and notched axes they smote, and against that iron ring Baibars hurled his slayers again and again, and again and again he saw his hordes stagger back broken.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon when, foaming with rage that for once drowned his gargantuan laughter, he launched an irresistible charge upon the dying handful that tore them apart and scattered their corpses over the plain.

Here and there single knights or weary groups, like the drift of a storm, were ridden down by the chanting riders who swarmed the plain.

Cahal O’Donnel walked dazedly among the dead, the notched and crimsoned sword trailing in his weary hand. His helmet was gone, his arms and legs gashed, and from a deep wound beneath his hauberk, blood trickled sluggishly.

And suddenly his head jerked up.

“Cahal! Cahal!”

He drew an uncertain hand across his eyes. Surely the delirium of battle was upon him. But again the voice rose, in agony.

“Cahal!”

He was close to a boulder-strewn knoll where the dead lay thick. Among them lay Wulfgar the Dane, his unshaven lip a-snarl, his red beard tilted truculently, even in death. His mighty hand still gripped his ax, notched and

clotted red, and a gory heap of corpses beneath him gave mute evidence of his berserk fury.

"Cahal!"

The Gael dropped to his knees beside the slender figure of the Masked Knight. He lifted off the helmet – to reveal a wealth of unruly black tresses – gray eyes luminous and deep. A choked cry escaped him.

"Saints of God! Elinor! I dream – this is madness – "

The slender mailed arms groped about his neck. The eyes misted with growing blindness. Through the pliant links of the hauberk blood seeped steadily.

"You are not mad, Red Cahal," she whispered. "You do not dream. I am come to you at last – though I find you but in death. I did you a deathly wrong – and only when you were gone from me forever did I know I loved you. Oh, Cahal, we were born under a blind unquiet star – both seeking goals of fire and mist. I loved you – and knew it not until I lost you. You were gone – I knew not where.

"The Lady Elinor de Courcey died then, and in her place was born the Masked Knight. I took the Cross in penance. Only one faithful servitor knew my secret – and rode with me – to the ends of the earth – "

"Aye," muttered Cahal, "I remember him now – even in death he was faithful."

"When I met you among the hills below Jerusalem," she whispered faintly, "my heart tore at its strings to burst from my bosom and fall in the dust at your feet. But I dared not reveal myself to you. Ah, Cahal, I have done bitter penance! I have died for the Cross this day, like a knight. But I ask not forgiveness of God. Let Him do with me as He will – but oh, it is forgiveness of you I crave, and dare not ask!"

"I freely forgive you," said Cahal heavily. "Fret no more about it, girl; it was but a little wrong, after all. Faith, all things and the deeds and dreams of men are fleeting and unstable as moon-mist, even the world which has here ended."

"Then kiss me," she gasped, fighting hard against the onrushing darkness.

Cahal passed his arm under her shoulders, lifting her to his blackened lips. With a convulsive effort she stiffened half erect in his arms, her eyes blazing with a strange light.

“The sun sets and the world ends!” she cried. “But I see a crown of red gold on your head, Red Cahal, and I shall sit beside you on a throne of glory! Hail, Cahal, chief of Uland; hail, Cahal Ruadh, *ard-ri na Eireann – ”*

She sank back, blood starting from her lips. Cahal eased her to the earth and rose like a man in a dream. He turned toward the low slope and staggered with a passing wave of dizziness. The sun was sinking toward the desert’s rim. To his eyes the whole plain seemed veiled in a mist of blood through which vague fantasmal figures moved in ghostly pageantry. A chaotic clamor rose like the acclaim to a king, and it seemed to him that all the shouts merged into one thunderous roar: *“Hail, Cahal Ruadh, ard-ri na Eireann!”*

He shook the mists from his brain and laughed. He strode down the slope, and a group of hawk-like riders swept down upon him with a swift rattle of hoofs. A bow twanged and an iron arrowhead smashed through his mail. With a laugh he tore it out and blood flooded his hauberk. A lance thrust at his throat and he caught the shaft in his left hand, lunging upward. The gray sword’s point rent through the rider’s mail, and his death-scream was still echoing when Cahal stepped aside from the slash of a scimitar and hacked off the hand that wielded it. A spear-point bent on the links of his mail and the lean gray sword leaped like a serpent-stroke, splitting helmet and head, spilling the rider from the saddle.

Cahal dropped his point to the earth and stood with bare head thrown back, as a gleaming clump of horsemen swept by. The foremost reined his white horse back on its haunches with a shout of laughter. And so the victor faced the vanquished. Behind Cahal the sun was setting in a sea of blood, and his hair, floating in the rising breeze, caught the last glints of the sun, so that it seemed to Baibars the Gael wore a misty crown of red gold.

“Well, *malik*,” laughed the Tatar, “they who oppose the destiny of Baibars lie under my horses’ hoofs, and over them I ride up the gleaming stair of empire!”

Cahal laughed and blood started from his lips. With a lion-like gesture he threw up his head, flinging high his sword in kingly salute.

“Lord of the East!” his voice rang like a trumpet-call, “welcome to the fellowship of kings! To the glory and the witch-fire, the gold and the moon-mist, the splendor and the death! Baibars, a king hails thee!”

And he leaped and struck as a tiger leaps. Not Baibars’ stallion that screamed and reared, not his trained swordsmen, not his own quickness

could have saved the memluk then. Death alone saved him – death that took the Gael in the midst of his leap. Red Cahal died in midair and it was a corpse that crashed against Baibars' saddle – a falling sword in a dead hand that, the momentum of the blow completing its arc, scarred Baibar's forehead and split his eyeball.

His warriors shouted and reined forward. Baibars slumped in the saddle, sick with agony, blood gushing from between the fingers that gripped his wound. As his chiefs cried out and sought to aid him, he lifted his head and saw, with his single, pain-dimmed eye, Red Cahal lying dead at his horse's feet. A smile was on the Gael's lips, and the gray sword lay in shards beside him, shattered, by some freak of chance, on the stones as it fell beside the wielder.

"A hakim, in the name of Allah," groaned Baibars. "I am a dead man."

"Nay, you are not dead, my lord," said one of his memluk chiefs. "It is the wound from the dead man's sword and it is grievous enough, but bethink you: here has the host of the Franks ceased to be. The barons are all taken or slain and the Cross of the patriarch has fallen. Such of the Kharesmians as live are ready to serve you as their new lord – since Kizil Malik slew their khan. The Arabs have fled and Damascus lies helpless before you – and Jerusalem is ours! You will yet be sultan of Egypt."

"I have conquered," answered Baibars, shaken for the first time in his wild life, "but I am half-blind – and of what avail to slay men of that breed? They will come again and again and again, riding to death like a feast because of the restlessness of their souls, through all the centuries. What though we prevail this little Now? They are a race unconquerable, and at last, in a year or a thousand years, they will trample Islam under their feet and ride again through the streets of Jerusalem."

And over the red field of battle night fell shuddering.

The Skull in the Clouds

The Black Prince scowled above his lance, and wrath in his hot eyes lay,
“I would that you rode with the spears of France and not at my side today.
A man may parry an open blow, but I know not where to fend;
I would that you were an open foe, instead of a sworn friend.

“You came to me in an hour of need, and your heart I thought I saw;
But you are one of a rebel breed that knows not king or law.
You – with your ever smiling face and a black heart under your mail –
With the haughty strain of the Norman race and the wild, black blood of the Gael.

“Thrice in a night fight’s close-locked gloom my shield by merest chance
Has turned a sword that thrust like doom – I wot ’twas not of France!
And in a dust-cloud, blind and red, as we charged the Provence line
An unseen axe struck Fitzjames dead, who gave his life for mine.

“Had I proofs, your head should fall this day or ever I rode to strife.
Are you but a wolf to rend and slay, with naught to guide your life?
No gleam of love in a lady’s eyes, no honor or faith or fame?”
I raised my face to the brooding skies and laughed like a roaring flame.

“I followed the sign of the Geraldine from Meath to the western sea

Till a careless word that I scarcely heard bred hate in the heart of me.
Then I lent my sword to the Irish chiefs, for half of my blood is Gael,
And we cut like a sickle through the sheafs as we harried the lines of the Pale.

“But Dermod O’Connor wild with wine, called me a dog at heel,
And I cleft his bosom to the spine and fled to the black O’Neill.
We harried the chieftains of the south; we shattered the Norman bows.
We wasted the land from Cork to Louth; we trampled our fallen foes.

“But Conn O’Neill put on me a slight before the Gaelic lords,
And I betrayed him in the night to the red O’Donnell swords.
I am no thrall to any man, no vassal to any king.
I owe no vow to any clan, nor faith to any thing.

“Traitor – but not for fear or gold, but the fire in my own dark brain;
For the coins I loot from the broken hold I throw to the winds again.
And I am true to myself alone, through pride and the traitor’s part.
I would give my life to shield your throne, or rip from your breast the heart

“For a look or a word, scarce thought or heard. I follow a fading fire,
Past bead and bell and the hangman’s cell, like a harp-call of desire.
I may not see the road I ride for the witch-fire lamps that gleam;
But phantoms glide at my bridle-side, and I follow a nameless Dream.”

The Black Prince shuddered and shook his head, then crossed himself amain:
“Go, in God’s name, and never,” he said, “ride in my sight again.”

The starlight silvered my bridle-rein; the moonlight burned my lance
As I rode back from the wars again through the pleasant hills of France,
As I rode to tell Lord Amory of the dark Fitzgerald line
If the Black Prince died, it needs must be by another hand than mine.

A Thousand Years Ago

I was chief of the Chatagai
A thousand years ago;
Turan’s souls and her swords were high;
Arrows flew as snow might fly,
We shook the desert and broke the sky
When I was a chief of the Chatagai
A thousand years ago.

When I was a chief of the Chatagai,
A thousand years ago,
I bared my sword, I loosed the rein,
I shattered the shahs on Iran’s plain,
I smote on the walls of Rhoum in vain,
When I was chief of the Chatagai
A thousand years ago.

I was a chief of the Chatagai,
A thousand years ago,
And still I dream of the flying strife,
Of the desert dawns and the unreined life
When I took the wars of the world to wife –
When I was a chief of the Chatagai
A thousand years ago.

Lord of Samarcand

The roar of battle had died away; the sun hung like a ball of crimson gold on the western hills. Across the trampled field of battle no squadrons thundered, no war-cry reverberated. Only the shrieks of the wounded and the moans of the dying rose to the circling vultures whose black wings swept closer and closer until they brushed the pallid faces in their flight.

On his rangy stallion, in a hillside thicket, Ak Boga the Tatar watched, as he had watched since dawn, when the mailed hosts of the Franks, with their forest of lances and flaming pennons, had moved out on the plains of Nicopolis to meet the grim hordes of Bayazid.

Ak Boga, watching their battle array, had chk-chk'd his teeth in surprize and disapproval as he saw the glittering squadrons of mounted knights draw out in front of the compact masses of stalwart infantry, and lead the advance. They were the flower of Europe – cavaliers of Austria, Germany, France and Italy; but Ak Boga shook his head.

He had seen the knights charge with a thunderous roar that shook the heavens, had seen them smite the outriders of Bayazid like a withering blast and sweep up the long slope in the teeth of a raking fire from the Turkish archers at the crest. He had seen them cut down the archers like ripe corn, and launch their whole power against the oncoming spahis, the Turkish light cavalry. And he had seen the spahis buckle and break and scatter like spray before a storm, the light-armed riders flinging aside their lances and spurring like mad out of the melee. But Ak Boga had looked back, where, far behind, the sturdy Hungarian pikemen toiled, seeking to keep within supporting distance of the headlong cavaliers.

He had seen the Frankish horsemen sweep on, reckless of their horses' strength as of their own lives, and cross the ridge. From his vantage-point Ak Boga could see both sides of that ridge and he knew that there lay the main power of the Turkish army – sixty-five thousand strong – the janizaries, the terrible Ottoman infantry, supported by the heavy cavalry, tall men in strong armor, bearing spears and powerful bows.

And now the Franks realized, what Ak Boga had known, that the real battle lay before them; and their horses were weary, their lances broken, their throats choked with dust and thirst.

Ak Boga had seen them waver and look back for the Hungarian infantry; but it was out of sight over the ridge, and in desperation the knights hurled themselves on the massed enemy, striving to break the ranks by sheer ferocity. That charge never reached the grim lines. Instead a storm of arrows broke the Christian front, and this time, on exhausted horses, there was no riding against it. The whole first rank went down, horses and men pin-cushioned, and in that red shambles their comrades behind them stumbled and fell headlong. And then the janizaries charged with a deep-toned roar of "Allah!" that was like the thunder of deep surf.

All this Ak Boga had seen; had seen, too, the inglorious flight of some of the knights, the ferocious resistance of others. On foot, leaguered and outnumbered, they fought with sword and ax, falling one by one, while the tide of battle flowed around them on either side and the blood-drunken Turks fell upon the infantry which had just toiled into sight over the ridge.

There, too, was disaster. Flying knights thundered through the ranks of the Wallachians, and these broke and retired in ragged disorder. The Hungarians and Bavarians received the brunt of the Turkish onslaught, staggered and fell back stubbornly, contesting every foot, but unable to check the victorious flood of Moslem fury.

And now, as Ak Boga scanned the field, he no longer saw the serried lines of the pikemen and ax-fighters. They had fought their way back over the ridge and were in full, though ordered, retreat, and the Turks had come back to loot the dead and mutilate the dying. Such knights as had not fallen or broken away in flight, had flung down the hopeless sword and surrendered. Among the trees on the farther side of the vale, the main Turkish host was clustered, and even Ak Boga shivered a trifle at the screams which rose where Bayazid's swordsmen were butchering the captives. Nearer at hand ran ghoulish figures, swift and furtive, pausing

briefly over each heap of corpses; here and there gaunt dervishes with foam on their beards and madness in their eyes plied their knives on writhing victims who screamed for death.

“Erlik!” muttered Ak Boga. “They boasted that they could hold up the sky on their lances, were it to fall, and lo, the sky has fallen and their host is meat for the ravens!”

He reined his horse away through the thicket; there might be good plunder among the plumed and corseleted dead, but Ak Boga had come hither on a mission which was yet to be completed. But even as he emerged from the thicket, he saw a prize no Tatar could forego – a tall Turkish steed with an ornate high-peaked Turkish saddle came racing by. Ak Boga spurred quickly forward and caught the flying, silver-worked rein. Then, leading the restive charger, he trotted swiftly down the slope away from the battlefield.

Suddenly he reined in among a clump of stunted trees. The hurricane of strife, slaughter and pursuit had cast its spray on this side of the ridge. Before him Ak Boga saw a tall, richly clad knight grunting and cursing as he sought to hobble along using his broken lance as a crutch. His helmet was gone, revealing a blond head and a florid choleric face. Not far away lay a dead horse, an arrow protruding from its ribs.

As Ak Boga watched, the big knight stumbled and fell with a scorching oath. Then from the bushes came a man such as Ak Boga had never seen before, even among the Franks. This man was taller than Ak Boga, who was a big man, and his stride was like that of a gaunt gray wolf. He was bareheaded, a tousled shock of tawny hair topping a sinister scarred face, burnt dark by the sun, and his eyes were cold as gray icy steel. The great sword he trailed was crimson to the hilt, his rusty scale-mail shirt hacked and rent, the kilt beneath it torn and slashed. His right arm was stained to the elbow, and blood dripped sluggishly from a deep gash in his left forearm.

“Devil take all!” growled the crippled knight in Norman French, which Ak Boga understood; “this is the end of the world!”

“Only the end of a horde of fools,” the tall Frank’s voice was hard and cold, like the rasp of a sword in its scabbard.

The lame man swore again. “Stand not there like a blockhead, fool! Catch me a horse! My damnable steed caught a shaft in its cursed hide, and though I spurred it until the blood spurted over my heels, it fell at last, and I think, broke my ankle.”

The tall one dropped his sword-point to the earth and stared at the other somberly.

“You give commands as though you sat in your own fief of Saxony, Lord Baron Frederik! But for you and divers other fools, we had cracked Bayazid like a nut this day.”

“Dog!” roared the baron, his intolerant face purpling; “this insolence to me? I’ll have you flayed alive!”

“Who but you cried down the Elector in council?” snarled the other, his eyes glittering dangerously. “Who called Sigismund of Hungary a fool because he urged that the lord allow him to lead the assault with his infantry? And who but you had the ear of that young fool High Constable of France, Philip of Artois, so that in the end he led the charge that ruined us all, nor would wait on the ridge for support from the Hungarians? And now you, who turned tail quicker than any when you saw what your folly had done, you bid me fetch you a horse!”

“Aye, and quickly, you Scottish dog!” screamed the baron, convulsed with fury. “You shall answer for this – ”

“I’ll answer here,” growled the Scotsman, his manner changing murderously. “You have heaped insults on me since we first sighted the Danube. If I’m to die, I’ll settle one score first!”

“Traitor!” bellowed the baron, whitening, scrambling up on his knee and reaching for his sword. But even as he did so, the Scotsman struck, with an oath, and the baron’s roar was cut short in a ghastly gurgle as the great blade sheared through shoulder-bone, ribs and spine, casting the mangled corpse limply upon the blood-soaked earth.

“Well struck, warrior!” At the sound of the guttural voice the slayer wheeled like a great wolf, wrenching free the sword. For a tense moment the two eyed each other, the swordsman standing above his victim, a brooding somber figure terrible with potentialities of blood and slaughter, the Tatar sitting his high-peaked saddle like a carven image.

“I am no Turk,” said Ak Boga. “You have no quarrel with me. See, my scimitar is in its sheath. I have need of a man like you – strong as a bear, swift as a wolf, cruel as a falcon. I can bring you to much you desire.”

“I desire only vengeance on the head of Bayazid,” rumbled the Scotsman.

The dark eyes of the Tatar glittered.

“Then come with me. For my lord is the sworn enemy of the Turk.”

“Who is your lord?” asked the Scotsman suspiciously.

“Men call him the Lame,” answered Ak Boga, “Timour, the Servant of God, by the favor of Allah, Amir of Tatary.”

The Scotsman turned his head in the direction of the distant shrieks which told that the massacre was still continuing, and stood for an instant like a great bronze statue. Then he sheathed his sword with a savage rasp of steel.

“I will go,” he said briefly.

The Tatar grinned with pleasure, and leaning forward, gave into his hands the reins of the Turkish horse. The Frank swung into the saddle and glanced inquiringly at Ak Boga. The Tatar motioned with his helmeted head and reined away down the slope. They touched in the spurs and cantered swiftly away into the gathering twilight, while behind them the shrieks of dire agony still rose to the shivering stars which peered palely out, as if frightened by man’s slaughter of man.

II

"Had we twa been upon the green,
And never an eye to see,
I wad hae had you, flesh and fell;
But your sword shall gae wi' me."

– The Battle of Otterbourne

Again the sun was sinking, this time over a desert, etching the spires and minarets of a blue city. Ak Boga drew rein on the crest of a rise and sat motionless for a moment, sighing deeply as he drank in the familiar sight, whose wonder never faded.

"Samarcand," said Ak Boga.

"We have ridden far," answered his companion. Ak Boga smiled. The Tatar's garments were dusty, his mail tarnished, his face somewhat drawn, though his eyes still twinkled. The Scotsman's strongly chiselled features had not altered.

"You are of steel, *bogatyr,*" said Ak Boga. "The road we have traveled would have wearied a courier of Genghis Khan. And by Erlik, I, who was bred in the saddle, am the wearier of the twain!"

The Scotsman gazed unspeaking at the distant spires, remembering the days and nights of apparently endless riding, when he had slept swaying in the saddle, and all the sounds of the universe had died down to the thunder of hoofs. He had followed Ak Boga unquestioning: through hostile hills where they avoided trails and cut through the blind wilderness, over mountains where the chill winds cut like a sword-edge, into stretches of steppes and desert. He had not questioned when Ak Boga's relaxing vigilance told him that they were out of hostile country, and when the Tatar began to stop at wayside posts where tall dark men in iron helmets brought fresh steeds. Even then there was no slacking of the headlong pace: a swift guzzling of wine and snatching of food; occasionally a brief interlude of sleep, on a heap of hides and cloaks; then again the drum of racing hoofs. The Frank knew that Ak Boga was bearing the news of the battle to his mysterious lord, and he wondered at the distance they had covered between the first post where saddled steeds awaited them and the blue spires that

marked their journey's end. Wide-flung indeed were the boundaries of the lord called Timour the Lame.

They had covered that vast expanse of country in a time the Frank would have sworn impossible. He felt now the grinding wear of that terrible ride, but he gave no outward sign. The city shimmered to his gaze, mingling with the blue of the distance, so that it seemed part of the horizon, a city of illusion and enchantment. Blue: the Tatars lived in a wide magnificent land, lavish with color schemes, and the prevailing motif was blue. In the spires and domes of Samarcand were mirrored the hues of the skies, the far mountains and the dreaming lakes.

"You have seen lands and seas no Frank has beheld," said Ak Boga, "and rivers and towns and caravan trails. Now you shall gaze upon the glory of Samarcand, which the lord Timour found a town of dried brick and has made a metropolis of blue stone and ivory and marble and silver filigree."

The two descended into the plain and threaded their way between converging lines of camel-caravans and mule-trains whose robed drivers shouted incessantly, all bound for the Turquoise Gates, laden with spices, silks, jewels, and slaves, the goods and gauds of India and Cathay, of Persia and Arabia and Egypt.

"All the East rides the road to Samarcand," said Ak Boga.

They passed through the wide gilt-inlaid gates where the tall spearmen shouted boisterous greetings to Ak Boga, who yelled back, rolling in his saddle and smiting his mailed thigh with the joy of homecoming. They rode through the wide winding streets, past palace and market and mosque, and bazaars thronged with the people of a hundred tribes and races, bartering, disputing, shouting. The Scotsman saw hawk-faced Arabs, lean apprehensive Syrians, fat fawning Jews, turbaned Indians, languid Persians, ragged swaggering but suspicious Afghans, and more unfamiliar forms; figures from the mysterious reaches of the north, and the far east; stocky Mongols with broad inscrutable faces and the rolling gait of an existence spent in the saddle; slant-eyed Cathayans in robes of watered silk; tall quarrelsome Vigurs; round-faced Kipchaks; narrow-eyed Kirghiz; a score of races whose existence the West did not guess. All the Orient flowed in a broad river through the gates of Samarcand.

The Frank’s wonder grew; the cities of the West were hovels compared to this. Past academies, libraries and pleasure-pavilions they rode, and Ak Boga turned into a wide gateway, guarded by silver lions. There they gave their steeds into the hands of silk-sashed grooms, and walked along a winding avenue paved with marble and lined with slim green trees. The Scotsman, looking between the slender trunks, saw shimmering expanses of roses, cherry trees and waving exotic blossoms unknown to him, where fountains jetted arches of silver spray. So they came to the palace, gleaming blue and gold in the sunlight, passed between tall marble columns and entered the chambers with their gilt-worked arched doorways, and walls decorated with delicate paintings of Persian and Cathayan artists, and the gold tissue and silver work of Indian artistry.

Ak Boga did not halt in the great reception room with its slender carven columns and frieze-work of gold and turquoise, but continued until he came to the fretted gold-adorned arch of a door which opened into a small blue-domed chamber that looked out through gold-barred windows into a series of broad, shaded, marble-paved galleries. There silk-robed courtiers took their weapons, and grasping their arms, led them between files of giant black mutes in silken loin-cloths, who held two-handed scimitars upon their shoulders, and into the chamber, where the courtiers released their arms and fell back, salaaming deeply. Ak Boga knelt before the figure on the silken divan, but the Scotsman stood grimly erect, nor was obeisance required of him. Some of the simplicity of Genghis Khan’s court still lingered in the courts of these descendants of the nomads.

The Scotsman looked closely at the man on the divan; this, then, was the mysterious Tamerlane, who was already become a mythical figure in Western lore. He saw a man as tall as himself, gaunt but heavy-boned, with a wide sweep of shoulders and the Tatar’s characteristic depth of chest. His face was not as dark as Ak Boga’s, nor did his black magnetic eyes slant; and he did not sit cross-legged as a Mongol sits. There was power in every line of his figure, in his clean-cut features, in the crisp black hair and beard, untouched with gray despite his sixty-one years. There was something of the Turk in his appearance, thought the Scotsman, but the dominant note was the lean wolfish hardness that suggested the nomad. He was closer to the basic Turanian rootstock than was the Turk; nearer to the wolfish, wandering Mongols who were his ancestors.

“Speak, Ak Boga,” said the Amir in a deep powerful voice. “Ravens have flown westward, but there has come no word.”

“We rode before the word, my lord,” answered the warrior. “The news is at our heels, traveling swift on the caravan roads. Soon the couriers, and after them the traders and the merchants, will bring to you the news that a great battle has been fought in the west; that Bayazid has broken the hosts of the Christians, and the wolves howl over the corpses of the kings of Frankistan.”

“And who stands beside you?” asked Timour, resting his chin on his hand and fixing his deep somber eyes on the Scotsman.

“A chief of the Franks who escaped the slaughter,” answered Ak Boga. “Single-handed he cut his way through the melee, and in his flight paused to slay a Frankish lord who had put shame upon him aforetime. He has no fear and his thews are steel. By Allah, we passed through the land outracing the wind to bring thee news of the war, and this Frank is less weary than I, who learned to ride ere I learned to walk.”

“Why do you bring him to me?”

“It was my thought that he would make a mighty warrior for thee, my lord.”

“In all the world,” mused Timour, “there are scarce half a dozen men whose judgment I trust. Thou art one of those,” he added briefly, and Ak Boga, who had flushed darkly in embarrassment, grinned delightedly.

“Can he understand me?” asked Timour.

“He speaks Turki, my lord.”

“How are you named, oh Frank?” queried the Amir. “And what is your rank?”

“I am called Donald MacDeesa,” answered the Scotsman. “I come from the country of Scotland, beyond Frankistan. I have no rank, either in my own land or in the army I followed. I live by my wits and the edge of my claymore.”

“Why do you ride to me?”

“Ak Boga told me it was the road to vengeance.”

“Against whom?”

“Bayazid the Sultan of the Turks, whom men name the Thunderer.”

Timour dropped his head on his mighty breast for a space and in the silence MacDeesa heard the silvery tinkle of a fountain in an outer court and the musical voice of a Persian poet singing to a lute.

Then the great Tatar lifted his lion’s head.

“Sit ye with Ak Boga upon this divan close at my hand,” said he. “I will instruct you how to trap a gray wolf.”

As Donald did so, he unconsciously lifted a hand to his face, as if he felt the sting of a blow eleven years old. Irrelevantly his mind reverted to another king and another, ruder court, and in the swift instant that elapsed as he took his seat close to the Amir, glanced fleetingly along the bitter trail of his life.

Young Lord Douglas, most powerful of all the Scottish barons, was headstrong and impetuous, and like most Norman lords, choleric when he fancied himself crossed. But he should not have struck the lean young Highlander who had come down into the border country seeking fame and plunder in the train of the lords of the marches. Douglas was accustomed to using both riding-whip and fists freely on his pages and esquires, and promptly forgetting both the blow and the cause; and they, being also Normans and accustomed to the tempers of their lords, likewise forgot. But Donald MacDeesa was no Norman; he was a Gael, and Gaelic ideas of honor and insult differ from Norman ideas as the wild uplands of the North differ from the fertile plains of the Lowlands. The chief of Donald’s clan could not have struck him with impunity, and for a Southron to so venture – hate entered the young Highlander’s blood like a black river and filled his dreams with crimson nightmares.

Douglas forgot the blow too quickly to regret it. But Donald’s was the vengeful heart of those wild folk who keep the fires of feud flaming for centuries and carry grudges to the grave. Donald was as fully Celtic as his savage Dalriadian ancestors who carved out the kingdom of Alba with their swords.

But he hid his hate and bided his time, and it came in a hurricane of border war. Robert Bruce lay in his tomb, and his heart, stilled forever, lay somewhere in Spain beneath the body of Black Douglas, who had failed in the pilgrimage which was to place the heart of his king before the Holy Sepulcher. The great king’s grandson, Robert II, had little love for storm and stress; he desired peace with England and he feared the great family of Douglas.

But despite his protests, war spread flaming wings along the border and the Scottish lords rode joyfully on the foray. But before the Douglas

marched, a quiet and subtle man came to Donald MacDeesa's tent and spoke briefly and to the point.

"Knowing that the aforesaid lord hath put despite upon thee, I whispered thy name softly to him that sendeth me, and sooth, it is well known that this same bloody lord doth continually embroil the kingdoms and stir up wrath and wo between the sovereigns – " he said in part, and he plainly spoke the word, "Protection."

Donald made no answer and the quiet person smiled and left the young Highlander sitting with his chin on his fist, staring grimly at the floor of his tent.

Thereafter Lord Douglas marched right gleefully with his retainers into the border country and "burned the dales of Tyne, and part of Bambroughshire, and three good towers on Reidswire fells, he left them all on fire," and spread wrath and wo generally among the border English, so that King Richard sent notes of bitter reproach to King Robert, who bit his nails with rage, but waited patiently for news he expected to hear.

Then after an indecisive skirmish at Newcastle, Douglas encamped in a place called Otterbourne, and there Lord Percy, hot with wrath, came suddenly upon him in the night, and in the confused melee which ensued, called by the Scottish the Battle of Otterbourne and by the English Chevy Chase, Lord Douglas fell. The English swore he was slain by Lord Percy, who neither confirmed nor denied it, not knowing himself what men he had slain in the confusion and darkness.

But a wounded man babbled of a Highland plaid, before he died, and an ax wielded by no English hand. Men came to Donald and questioned him hardly, but he snarled at them like a wolf, and the king, after piously burning many candles for Douglas' soul in public, and thanking God for the baron's demise in the privacy of his chamber, announced that "we have heard of this persecution of a loyal subject and it being plain in our mind that this youth is innocent as ourselves in this matter we hereby warn all men against further hounding of him at pain of death."

So the king's protection saved Donald's life, but men muttered in their teeth and ostracized him. Sullen and embittered, he withdrew to himself and brooded in a hut alone, till one night there came news of the king's sudden abdication and retirement into a monastery. The stress of a monarch's life in those stormy times was too much for the monkish sovereign. Close on the heels of the news came men with drawn daggers to Donald's hut, but they

found the cage empty. The hawk had flown, and though they followed his trail with reddened spurs, they found only a steed that had fallen dead at the seashore, and saw only a white sail dwindling in the growing dawn.

Donald went to the Continent because, with the Lowlands barred to him, there was nowhere else to go; in the Highlands he had too many blood-feuds; and across the border the English had already made a noose for him. That was in 1389. Seven years of fighting and intriguing in European wars and plots. And when Constantinople cried out before the irresistible onslaught of Bayazid, and men pawned their lands to launch a new Crusade, the Highland swordsman had joined the tide that swept eastward to its doom. Seven years – and a far cry from the border marches to the blue-domed palaces of fabulous Samarcand, reclining on a silken divan as he listened to the measured words which flowed in a tranquil monotone from the lips of the lord of Tatary.

III

"If thou'rt the lord of this castle,
Sae well it pleases me:
For, ere I cross the border fells,
The tane of us shall dee."

– The Battle of Otterbourne

Time flowed on as it does whether men live or die. The bodies rotted on the plains of Nicopolis, and Bayazid, drunk with power, trampled the scepters of the world. The Greeks, the Serbs and the Hungarians he ground beneath his iron legions, and into his spreading empire he molded the captive races. He laved his limbs in wild debauchery, the frenzy of which astounded even his tough vassals. The women of the world flowed whimpering between his iron fingers and he hammered the golden crowns of kings to shoe his war-steed. Constantinople reeled beneath his strokes, and Europe licked her wounds like a crippled wolf, held at bay on the defensive. Somewhere in the misty mazes of the East moved his arch-foe Timour, and to him Bayazid sent missives of threat and mockery. No response was forthcoming, but word came along the caravans of a mighty marching and a great war in the south; of the plumed helmets of India scattered and flying before the Tatar spears. Little heed gave Bayazid; India was little more real to him than it was to the Pope of Rome. His eyes were turned westward toward the Caphar cities. "I will harrow Frankistan with steel and flame," he said. "Their sultans shall draw my chariots and the bats lair in the palaces of the infidels."

Then in the early spring of 1402 there came to him, in an inner court of his pleasure-palace at Brusa, where he lolled guzzling the forbidden wine and watching the antics of naked dancing girls, certain of his emirs, bringing a tall Frank whose grim scarred visage was darkened by the suns of far deserts.

"This Caphar dog rode into the camp of the janizaries as a madman rides, on a foam-covered steed," said they, "saying he sought Bayazid. Shall we flay him before thee, or tear him between wild horses?"

“Dog,” said the Sultan, drinking deeply and setting down the goblet with a satisfied sigh, “you have found Bayazid. Speak, ere I set you howling on a stake.”

“Is this fit welcome for one who has ridden far to serve you?” retorted the Frank in a harsh unshaken voice. “I am Donald MacDeesa and among your janizaries there is no man who can stand up against me in sword-play, and among your barrel-bellied wrestlers there is no man whose back I can not break.”

The Sultan tugged his black beard and grinned.

“Would thou wert not an infidel,” said he, “for I love a man with a bold tongue. Speak on, oh Rustum! What other accomplishments are thine, mirror of modesty?”

The Highlander grinned like a wolf.

“I can break the back of a Tatar and roll the head of a Khan in the dust.”

Bayazid stiffened, subtly changing, his giant frame charged with dynamic power and menace; for behind all his roistering and bellowing conceit was the keenest brain west of the Oxus.

“What folly is this?” he rumbled. “What means this riddle?”

“I speak no riddle,” snapped the Gael. “I have no more love for you than you for me. But more I hate Timour-il-leng who has cast dung in my face.”

“You come to me from that half-pagan dog?”

“Aye. I was his man. I rode beside him and cut down his foes. I climbed city walls in the teeth of the arrows and broke the ranks of mailed spearmen. And when the honors and gifts were distributed among the emirs, what was given me? The gall of mockery and the wormwood of insult. ‘Ask thy dog-sultans of Frankistan for gifts, Caphar,’ said Timour – may the worms devour him – and the emirs roared with laughter. As God is my witness, I will wipe out that laughter in the crash of falling walls and the roar of flames!”

Donald’s menacing voice reverberated through the chamber and his eyes were cold and cruel. Bayazid pulled his beard for a space and said, “And you come to me for vengeance? Shall I war against the Lame One because of the spite of a wandering Caphar vagabond?”

“You *will* war against him, or he against you,” answered MacDeesa. “When Timour wrote asking that you lend no aid to his foes, Kara Yussef the Turkoman, and Ahmed, Sultan of Bagdad, you answered him with words not to be borne, and sent horsemen to stiffen their ranks against him.

Now the Turkomans are broken, Bagdad has been looted and Damascus lies in smoking ruins. Timour has broken your allies and he will not forget the despite you put upon him."

"Close have you been to the Lame One to know all this," muttered Bayazid, his glittering eyes narrowing with suspicion. "Why should I trust a Frank? By Allah, I deal with them by the sword! As I dealt with those fools at Nicopolis!"

A fierce uncontrollable flame leaped up for a fleeting instant in the Highlander's eyes, but the dark face showed no sign of emotion.

"Know this, Turk," he answered with an oath, "I can show you how to break Timour's back."

"Dog!" roared the Sultan, his gray eyes blazing, "think you I need the aid of a nameless rogue to conquer the Tatar?"

Donald laughed in his face, a hard mirthless laugh that was not pleasant.

"Timour will crack you like a walnut," said he deliberately. "Have you seen the Tatars in war array? Have you seen their arrows darkening the sky as they loosed, a hundred thousand as one? Have you seen their horsemen flying before the wind as they charged home and the desert shook beneath their hoofs? Have you seen the array of their elephants, with towers on their backs, whence archers send shafts in black clouds and the fire that burns flesh and leather alike pours forth?"

"All this I have heard," answered the Sultan, not particularly impressed.

"But you have not seen," returned the Highlander; he drew back his tunic sleeve and displayed a scar on his iron-thewed arm. "An Indian tulwar

kissed me there, before Delhi. I rode with the emirs when the whole world seemed to shake with the thunder of combat. I saw Timour trick the Sultan of Hindustan and draw him from the lofty walls as a serpent is drawn from its lair. By God, the plumed Rajputs fell like ripened grain before us!

"Of Delhi Timour left a pile of deserted ruins, and without the broken walls he built a pyramid of a hundred thousand skulls. You would say I lied were I to tell you how many days the Khyber Pass was thronged with the glittering hosts of warriors and captives returning along the road to Samarcand. The mountains shook with their tread and the wild Afghans came down in hordes to place their heads beneath Timour's heel – as he will grind *thy* head underfoot, Bayazid!"

"This to me, dog?" yelled the Sultan. "I will fry you in oil!"

"Aye, prove your power over Timour by slaying the dog he mocked," answered MacDeesa bitterly. "You kings are all alike in fear and folly."

Bayazid gaped at him. "By Allah!" he said, "thou'rt mad to speak thus to the Thunderer. Bide in my court until I learn whether thou be rogue, fool, or madman. If spy, not in a day or three days will I slay thee, but for a full week shalt thou howl for death."

So Donald abode in the court of the Thunderer, under suspicion, and soon there came a brief but peremptory note from Timour, asking that "the thief of a Christian who hath taken refuge in the Ottoman court" be given up for just punishment. Whereat Bayazid, scenting an opportunity to further insult his rival, twisted his black beard gleefully between his fingers and grinned like a hyena as he dictated a reply, "Know, thou crippled dog, that the Osmanli are not in the habit of conceding to the insolent demands of pagan foes. Be at ease while thou mayest, oh lame dog, for soon I will take thy kingdom for an offal-heap and thy favorite wives for my concubines."

No further missives came from Timour. Bayazid drew Donald into wild revels, plied him with strong drink and even as he roared and roistered, he keenly watched the Highlander. But even his suspicions grew blunter when at his drunkest Donald spoke no word that might hint he was other than he seemed. He breathed the name of Timour only with curses. Bayazid discounted the value of his aid against the Tatars, but contemplated putting him to use, as Ottoman sultans always employed foreigners for confidants and guardsmen, knowing their own race too well. Under close, subtle

scrutiny the Gael indifferently moved, drinking all but the Sultan onto the floor in the wild drinking-bouts and bearing himself with a reckless valor that earned the respect of the hard-bitten Turks, in forays against the Byzantines.

Playing Genoese against Venetian, Bayazid lay about the walls of Constantinople. His preparations were made: Constantinople, and after that, Europe; the fate of Christendom wavered in the balance, there before the walls of the ancient city of the East. And the wretched Greeks, worn and starved, had already drawn up a capitulation, when word came flying out of the East, a dusty, blood-stained courier on a staggering horse. Out of the East, sudden as a desert-storm, the Tatars had swept, and Sivas, Bayazid's border city, had fallen. That night the shuddering people on the walls of Constantinople saw torches and cressets tossing and moving through the Turkish camp, gleaming on dark hawk-faces and polished armor, but the expected attack did not come, and dawn revealed a great flotilla of boats moving in a steady double stream back and forth across the Bosphorus, bearing the mailed warriors into Asia. The Thunderer's eyes were at last turned eastward.

IV

"The deer runs wild on hill and dale,
The birds fly wild from tree to tree;
But there is neither bread nor kale,
To fend my men and me."

– The Battle of Otterbourne

"Here we will camp," said Bayazid, shifting his giant body in the gold-crusted saddle. He glanced back at the long lines of his army, winding beyond sight over the distant hills: over 200,000 fighting men; grim janizaries, spahis glittering in plumes and silver mail, heavy cavalry in silk and steel; and his allies and alien subjects, Greek and Wallachian pikemen, the twenty thousand horsemen of King Peter Lazarus of Serbia, mailed from crown to heel; there were troops of Tatars, too, who had wandered into Asia Minor and been ground into the Ottoman empire with the rest – stocky Kalmucks, who had been on the point of mutiny at the beginning of the march, but had been quieted by a harangue from Donald MacDeesa, in their own tongue.

For weeks the Turkish host had moved eastward on the Sivas road, expecting to encounter the Tatars at any point. They had passed Angora, where the Sultan had established his base-camp; they had crossed the river Halys, or Kizil Irmak, and now were marching through the hill country that lies in the bend of that river which, rising east of Sivas, sweeps southward in a vast half-circle before it bends, west of Kirshehr, northward to the Black Sea.

"Here we camp," repeated Bayazid; "Sivas lies some sixty-five miles to the east. We will send scouts into the city."

"They will find it deserted," predicted Donald, riding at Bayazid's side, and the Sultan scoffed, "Oh gem of wisdom, will the Lame One flee so quickly?"

"He will not flee," answered the Gael. "Remember he can move his host far more quickly than you can. He will take to the hills and fall suddenly upon us when you least expect it."

Bayazid snorted his contempt. “Is he a magician, to flit among the hills with a horde of 150,000 men? Bah! I tell you, he will come along the Sivas road to join battle, and we will crack him like a nutshell.”

So the Turkish host went into camp and fortified the hills, and there they waited with growing wrath and impatience for a week. Bayazid’s scouts returned with the news that only a handful of Tatars held Sivas. The Sultan roared with rage and bewilderment.

“Fools, have ye passed the Tatars on the road?”

“Nay, by Allah,” swore the riders, “they vanished in the night like ghosts, none can say whither. And we have combed the hills between this spot and the city.”

“Timour has fled back to his desert,” said Peter Lazarus, and Donald laughed.

“When rivers run uphill, Timour will flee,” said he; “he lurks somewhere in the hills to the south.”

Bayazid had never taken other men’s advice, for he had found long ago that his own wit was superior. But now he was puzzled. He had never before fought the desert riders whose secret of victory was mobility and who passed through the land like blown clouds. Then his outriders brought in word that bodies of mounted men had been seen moving parallel to the Turkish right wing.

MacDeesa laughed like a jackal barking. “Now Timour sweeps upon us from the south, as I predicted.”

Bayazid drew up his lines and waited for the assault, but it did not come and his scouts reported that the riders had passed on and disappeared. Bewildered for the first time in his career, and mad to come to grips with his illusive foe, Bayazid struck camp and on a forced march reached the Halys river in two days, where he expected to find Timour drawn up to dispute his passage. No Tatar was to be seen. The Sultan cursed in his black beard; were these eastern devils ghosts, to vanish in thin air? He sent riders across the river and they came flying back, splashing recklessly through the shallow water. They had seen the Tatar rear-guard. Timour had eluded the whole Turkish army, and was even now marching on Angora! Frothing, Bayazid turned on MacDeesa.

“Dog, what have you to say now?”

“What would you?” the Highlander stood his ground boldly. “You have none but yourself to blame, if Timour has outwitted you. Have you

harkened to me in aught, good or bad? I told you Timour would not await your coming, nor did he. I told you he would leave the city and go into the southern hills. And he did. I told you he would fall upon us suddenly, and therein I was mistaken. I did not guess that he would cross the river and elude us. But all else I warned you of has come to pass."

Bayazid grudgingly admitted the truth of the Frank's words, but he was mad with fury. Else he had never sought to overtake the swift-moving horde before it reached Angora. He flung his columns across the river and started on the track of the Tatars. Timour had crossed the river near Sivas, and moving around the outer bend, eluded the Turks on the other side. And now Bayazid followed his road, which swung outward from the river, into the plains where there was little water – and no food, after the horde had swept through with torch and blade.

The Turks marched over a fire-blackened, slaughter-reddened waste. Timour covered the ground in three days, over which Bayazid's columns staggered in a week of forced marching; a hundred miles through the burning, desolated plain, strewn with bare hills that made marching a hell. As the strength of the army lay in its infantry, the cavalry was forced to set its pace with the foot-soldiers, and all stumbled wearily through the clouds of stinging dust that rose from beneath the sore, shuffling feet. Under a burning summer sun they plodded grimly along, suffering fiercely from hunger and thirst.

So they came at last to the plain of Angora, and saw the Tatars installed in the camp they had left, besieging the city. And a roar of desperation went up from the thirst-maddened Turks. Timour had changed the course of the little river which ran through Angora, so that now it ran behind the Tatar lines; the only way to reach it was straight through the desert hordes. The springs and wells of the countryside had been polluted or damaged. For an instant Bayazid sat silent in his saddle, gazing from the Tatar camp to his own long straggling lines, and the marks of suffering and vain wrath in the drawn faces of his warriors. A strange fear tugged at his heart, so unfamiliar he did not recognize the emotion. Victory had always been his; could it ever be otherwise?

V

"What's yon that follows at my side? –
The foe that ye must fight, my lord, –
That hirples swift as I can ride? –
The shadow of the night, my lord."

– Kipling

On that still summer morning the battle-lines stood ready for the death-grip. The Turks were drawn up in a long crescent, whose tips overlapped the Tatar wings, one of which touched the river and the other an entrenched hill fifteen miles away across the plain.

"Never in all my life have I sought another's advice in war," said Bayazid, "but you rode with Timour six years. Will he come to me?"

Donald shook his head. "You outnumber his host. He will never fling his riders against the solid ranks of your janizaries. He will stand afar off and overwhelm you with flights of arrows. You must go to him."

"Can I charge his horse with my infantry?" snarled Bayazid. "Yet you speak wise words. I must hurl my horse against his – and Allah knows his is the better cavalry."

"His right wing is the weaker," said Donald, a sinister light burning in his eyes. "Mass your strongest horsemen on your left wing, charge and shatter that part of the Tatar host; then let your left wing close in, assailing the main battle of the Amir on the flank, while your janizaries advance from the front. Before the charge the spahis on your right wing may make a feint at the lines, to draw Timour's attention."

Bayazid looked silently at the Gael. Donald had suffered as much as the rest on that fearful march. His mail was white with dust, his lips blackened, his throat caked with thirst.

"So let it be," said Bayazid. "Prince Suleiman shall command the left wing, with the Serbian horse and my own heavy cavalry, supported by the Kalmucks. We will stake all on one charge!"

And so they took up their positions, and no one noticed a flat-faced Kalmuck steal out of the Turkish lines and ride for Timour's camp, flogging his stocky pony like mad. On the left wing was massed the powerful

Serbian cavalry and the Turkish heavy horse, with the bow-armed Kalmucks behind. At the head of these rode Donald, for they had clamored for the Frank to lead them against their kin. Bayazid did not intend to match bow-fire with the Tatars, but to drive home a charge that would shatter Timour's lines before the Amir could further outmaneuver him. The Turkish right wing consisted of the spahis; the center of the janizaries and Serbian foot with Peter Lazarus, under the personal command of the Sultan.

Timour had no infantry. He sat with his bodyguard on a hillock behind the lines. Nur ad-Din commanded the right wing of the riders of high Asia, Ak Boga the left, Prince Muhammad the center. With the center were the elephants in their leather trappings, with their battle-towers and archers. Their awesome trumpeting was the only sound along the widespread steel-clad Tatar lines as the Turks came on with a thunder of cymbals and kettle-drums.

Like a thunderbolt Suleiman launched his squadrons at the Tatar right wing. They ran full into a terrible blast of arrows, but grimly they swept on, and the Tatar ranks reeled to the shock. Suleiman, cutting a heron-plumed chieftain out of his saddle, shouted in exultation, but even as he did so, behind him rose a guttural roar, "*Ghar! ghar! ghar!* Smite, brothers, for the lord Timour!"

With a sob of rage he turned and saw his horsemen going down in windrows beneath the arrows of the Kalmucks. And in his ear he heard Donald MacDeesa laughing like a madman.

"Traitor!" screamed the Turk. "This is your work– "

The claymore flashed in the sun and Prince Suleiman rolled headless from his saddle.

"One stroke for Nicopolis!" yelled the maddened Highlander. "Drive home your shafts, dog-brothers!"

The stocky Kalmucks yelped like wolves in reply, wheeling away to avoid the scimitars of the desperate Turks, and driving their deadly arrows into the milling ranks at close range. They had endured much from their masters; now was the hour of reckoning. And now the Tatar right wing drove home with a roar; and caught before and behind, the Turkish cavalry buckled and crumpled, whole troops breaking away in headlong flight. At one stroke had been swept away Bayazid's chance to crush his enemy's formation.

As the charge had begun, the Turkish right wing had advanced with a great blare of trumpets and roll of drums, and in the midst of its feint, had been caught by the sudden unexpected charge of the Tatar left. Ak Boga had swept through the light spahis, and losing his head momentarily in the lust of slaughter, he drove them flying before him until pursued and pursuers vanished over the slopes in the distance.

Timour sent Prince Muhammad with a reserve squadron to support the left wing and bring it back, while Nur ad-Din, sweeping aside the remnants of Bayazid's cavalry, swung in a pivot-like movement and thundered against the locked ranks of the janizaries. They held like a wall of iron, and Ak Boga, galloping back from his pursuit of the spahis, smote them on the other flank. And now Timour himself mounted his war-steed, and the center rolled like an iron wave against the staggering Turks. And now the real death-grip came to be.

Charge after charge crashed on those serried ranks, surging on and rolling back like onsweeping and receding waves. In clouds of fire-shot dust the janizaries stood unshaken, thrusting with reddened spears, smiting with dripping ax and notched scimitar. The wild riders swept in like blasting whirlwinds, raking the ranks with the storms of their arrows as they drew and loosed too swiftly for the eye to follow, rushing headlong into the press, screaming and hacking like madmen as their scimitars sheared through buckler, helmet and skull. And the Turks beat them back, overthrowing horse and rider; hacked them down and trampled them under, treading their own dead under foot to close the ranks, until both hosts trod on a carpet of the slain and the hoofs of the Tatar steeds splashed blood at every leap.

Repeated charges tore the Turkish host apart at last, and all over the plain the fight raged on, where clumps of spearmen stood back to back, slaying and dying beneath the arrows and scimitars of the riders from the steppes. Through the clouds of rising dust stalked the elephants trumpeting like Doom, while the archers on their backs rained down blasts of arrows and sheets of fire that withered men in their mail like burnt grain.

All day Bayazid had fought grimly on foot at the head of his men. At his side fell King Peter, pierced by a score of arrows. With a thousand of his janizaries the Sultan held the highest hill upon the plain, and through the blazing hell of that long afternoon he held it still, while his men died beside him. In a hurricane of splintering spears, lashing axes and ripping scimitars, the Sultan's warriors held the victorious Tatars to a gasping deadlock. And

then Donald MacDeesa, on foot, eyes glaring like a mad dog’s, rushed headlong through the melee and smote the Sultan with such hate-driven fury that the crested helmet shattered beneath the claymore’s whistling edge and Bayazid fell like a dead man. And over the weary groups of blood-stained defenders rolled the dark tide, and the kettle-drums of the Tatars thundered victory.

VI

"The searing glory which hath shone
Amid the jewels of my throne,
Halo of Hell! and with a pain
Not Hell shall make me fear again."

– Poe: *Tamerlane*

The power of the Osmanli was broken, the heads of the emirs heaped before Timour's tent. But the Tatars swept on; at the heels of the flying Turks they burst into Brusa, Bayazid's capital, sweeping the streets with sword and flame. Like a whirlwind they came and like a whirlwind they went, laden with treasures of the palace and the women of the vanished Sultan's seraglio.

Riding back to the Tatar camp beside Nur ad-Din and Ak Boga, Donald MacDeesa learned that Bayazid lived. The stroke which had felled him had only stunned, and the Turk was captive to the Amir he had mocked. MacDeesa cursed; the Gael was dusty and stained with hard riding and harder fighting; dried blood darkened his mail and clotted his scabbard mouth. A red-soaked scarf was bound about his thigh as a rude bandage; his eyes were blood-shot, his thin lips frozen in a snarl of battle-fury.

"By God, I had not thought a bullock could survive that blow. Is he to be crucified – as he swore to deal with Timour thus?"

"Timour gave him good welcome and will do him no hurt," answered the courtier who brought the news. "The Sultan will sit at the feast."

Ak Boga shook his head, for he was merciful except in the rush of battle, but in Donald's ears were ringing the screams of the butchered captives at Nicopolis, and he laughed shortly – a laugh that was not pleasant to hear.

To the fierce heart of the Sultan, death was easier than sitting a captive at the feast which always followed a Tatar victory. Bayazid sat like a grim image, neither speaking nor seeming to hear the crash of the kettle-drums, the roar of barbaric revelry. On his head was the jewelled turban of sovereignty, in his hand the gem-starred scepter of his vanished empire.

He did not touch the great golden goblet before him. Many and many a time had he exulted over the agony of the vanquished, with much less

mercy than was now shown him; now the unfamiliar bite of defeat left him frozen.

He stared at the beauties of his seraglio, who, according to Tatar custom, tremblingly served their new masters: black-haired Jewesses with slumberous, heavy-lidded eyes; lithe tawny Circassians and golden-haired Russians; dark-eyed Greek girls and Turkish women with figures like Juno – all naked as the day they were born, under the burning eyes of the Tatar lords.

He had sworn to ravish Timour's wives – the Sultan writhed as he saw the Despina, sister of Peter Lazarus and his favorite, nude like the rest, kneel and in quivering fear offer Timour a goblet of wine. The Tatar absently wove his fingers in her golden locks and Bayazid shuddered as if those fingers were locked in his own heart.

And he saw Donald MacDeesa sitting next to Timour, his stained dusty garments contrasting strangely with the silk-and-gold splendor of the Tatar lords – his savage eyes ablaze, his dark face wilder and more passionate than ever as he ate like a ravenous wolf and drained goblet after goblet of stinging wine. And Bayazid's iron control snapped. With a roar that struck the clamor dumb, the Thunderer lurched upright, breaking the heavy scepter like a twig between his hands and dashing the fragments to the floor.

All eyes turned toward him and some of the Tatars stepped quickly between him and their Amir, who only looked at him impassively.

“Dog and spawn of a dog!” roared Bayazid. “You came to me as one in need and I sheltered you! The curse of all traitors rest on your black heart!”

MacDeesa heaved up, scattered goblets and bowls.

“Traitors?” he yelled. “Is six years so long you forget the headless corpses that molder at Nicopolis? Have you forgotten the ten thousand captives you slew there, naked and with their hands bound? I fought you there with steel; and since I have fought you with guile! Fool, from the hour you marched from Brusa, you were doomed! It was I who spoke softly to

the Kalmucks, who hated you; so they were content and seemed willing to serve you. With them I communicated with Timour from the time we first left Angora – sending riders forth secretly or feigning to hunt for antelopes.

“Through me, Timour tricked you – even put into your head the plan of your battle! I caught you in a web of truths, knowing that you would follow your own course, regardless of what I or any one else said. I told you but two lies – when I said I sought revenge on Timour, and when I said the Amir would bide in the hills and fall upon us. Before battle joined I knew what Timour wished, and by my advice led you into a trap. So Timour, who had drawn out the plan you thought part yours and part mine, knew beforehand every move you would make. But in the end, it hinged on me, for it was I who turned the Kalmucks against you, and their arrows in the backs of your horsemen which tipped the scales when the battle hung in the balance.

“I paid high for my vengeance, Turk! I played my part under the eyes of your spies, in your court, every instant, even when my head was reeling with wine. I fought for you against the Greeks and took wounds. In the wilderness beyond the Halys I suffered with the rest. And I would have gone through greater hells to bring you to the dust!”

“Serve well your master as you have served me, traitor,” retorted the Sultan. “In the end, Timour-il-leng, you will rue the day you took this adder into your naked hands. Aye, may each of you bring the other down to death!”

“Be at ease, Bayazid,” said Timour impassively. “What is written, is written.”

“Aye!” answered the Turk with a terrible laugh. “And it is not written that the Thunderer should live a buffoon for a crippled dog! Lame One, Bayazid gives you – hail and farewell!”

And before any could stay him, the Sultan snatched a carving-knife from a table and plunged it to the hilt in his throat. A moment he reeled like a mighty tree, spurting blood, and then crashed thunderously down. All noise was hushed as the multitude stood aghast. A pitiful cry rang out as the young Despina ran forward, and dropping to her knees, drew the lion’s head of her grim lord to her naked bosom, sobbing convulsively. But Timour stroked his beard measuredly and half abstractedly. And Donald MacDeesa, seating himself, took up a great goblet that glowed crimson in the torchlight, and drank deeply.

VII

"Hath not the same fierce heirdom given
Rome to the Caesar – this to me?"

– Poe: *Tamerlane*

To understand the relationship of Donald MacDeesa to Timour, it is necessary to go back to that day, six years before, when in the turquoise-domed palace at Samarcand the Amir planned the overthrow of the Ottoman.

When other men looked days ahead, Timour looked years; and five years passed before he was ready to move against the Turk, and let Donald ride to Brusa ahead of a carefully trained pursuit. Five years of fierce fighting in the mountain snows and the desert dust, through which Timour moved like a mythical giant, and hard as he drove his chiefs, he drove the Highlander harder. It was as if he studied MacDeesa with the impersonally cruel eyes of a scientist, wringing every ounce of accomplishment from him, seeking to find the limit of man's endurance and valor – the final breaking-point. He did not find it.

The Gael was too utterly reckless to be trusted with hosts and armies. But in raids and forays, in the storming of cities, and in charges of battle, in any action requiring personal valor and prowess, the Highlander was all but invincible. He was a typical fighting-man of European wars, where tactics and strategy meant little and ferocious hand-to-hand fighting much, and where battles were decided by the physical prowess of the champions. In tricking the Turk, he had but followed the instructions given him by Timour.

There was scant love lost between the Gael and the Amir, to whom Donald was but a ferocious barbarian from the outlands of Frankistan. Timour never showered gifts and honors on Donald, as he did upon his Moslem chiefs. But the grim Gael scorned these gauds, seeming to derive his only pleasures from hard fighting and hard drinking. He ignored the formal reverence paid the Amir by his subjects, and in his cups dared beard the somber Tatar to his face, so that the people caught their breath.

“He is a wolf I unleash on my foes,” said Timour on one occasion to his lords.

“He is a two-edged blade that might cut the wielder,” ventured one of them.

“Not so long as the blade is forever smiting my enemies,” answered Timour.

After Angora, Timour gave Donald command of the Kalmucks, who accompanied their kin back into high Asia, and a swarm of restless, turbulent Vigurs. That was his reward: a wider range and a greater capacity for grinding toil and heart-bursting warfare. But Donald made no comment; he worked his slayers into fighting shape, and experimented with various types of saddles and armor, with firelocks – finding them much inferior in actual execution to the bows of the Tatars – and with the latest type of firearm, the cumbrous wheel-lock pistols used by the Arabs a century before they made their appearance in Europe.

Timour hurled Donald against his foes as a man hurls a javelin, little caring whether the weapon be broken or not. The Gael’s horsemen would come back blood-stained, dusty and weary, their armor hacked to shreds, their swords notched and blunted, but always with the heads of Timour’s foes swinging at their high saddle-peaks. Their savagery, and Donald’s own wild ferocity and superhuman strength, brought them repeatedly out of seemingly hopeless positions. And Donald’s wild-beast vitality caused him again and again to recover from ghastly wounds, until the iron-thewed Tatars marvelled at him.

As the years passed, Donald, always aloof and taciturn, withdrew more and more to himself. When not riding on campaigns, he sat alone in brooding silence in the taverns, or stalked dangerously through the streets, hand on his great sword, while the people slunk softly from in front of him. He had one friend, Ak Boga; but one interest outside of war and carnage. On a raid into Persia, a slim white wisp of a girl had run screaming across the path of the charging squadron and his men had seen Donald bend down and sweep her up into his saddle with one mighty hand. The girl was Zuleika, a Persian dancer.

Donald had a house in Samarcand, and a handful of servants, but only this one girl. She was comely, sensual and giddy. She adored her master in her way, and feared him with a very ecstasy of fear, but was not above secret amours with young soldiers when MacDeesa was away on the wars.

Like most Persian women of her caste, she had a capacity for petty intrigue and an inability for keeping her small nose out of affairs which were none of her business. She became a tale-bearer for Shadi Mulkh, the Persian paramour of Khalil, Timour's weak grandson, and thereby indirectly changed the destiny of the world. She was greedy, vain and an outrageous liar, but her hands were soft as drifting snow-flakes when she dressed the wounds of sword and spear on Donald's iron body. He never beat or cursed her, and though he never caressed or wooed her with gentle words as other men might, it was well known that he treasured her above all worldly possessions and honors.

Timour was growing old; he had played with the world as a man plays with a chessboard, using kings and armies for pawns. As a young chief without wealth or power, he had overthrown his Mongol masters, and mastered them in his turn. Tribe after tribe, race after race, kingdom after kingdom he had broken and molded into his growing empire, which stretched from the Gobi to the Mediterranean, from Moscow to Delhi – the mightiest empire the world ever knew. He had opened the doors of the South and East, and through them flowed the wealth of the earth. He had saved Europe from an Asiatic invasion, when he checked the tide of Turkish conquest – a fact of which he neither knew nor cared. He had built cities and he had destroyed cities. He had made the desert blossom like a garden, and he had turned flowering lands into desert. At his command pyramids of skulls had reared up, and lives flowed out like rivers. His helmeted war-lords were exalted above the multitudes and nations cried out in vain beneath his grinding heel, like lost women crying in the mountains at night.

Now he looked eastward, where the purple empire of Cathay dreamed away the centuries. Perhaps, with the waning of life's tide, it was the old sleeping home-calling of his race; perhaps he remembered the ancient heroic khans, his ancestors, who had ridden southward out of the barren Gobi into the purple kingdoms.

The Grand Vizier shook his head, as he played at chess with his imperial master. He was old and weary, and he dared speak his mind even to Timour.

"My lord, of what avail these endless wars? You have already subjugated more nations than Genghis Khan or Alexander. Rest in the peace of your

conquests and complete the work you have begun in Samarcand. Build more stately palaces. Bring here the philosophers, the artists, the poets of the world – ”

Timour shrugged his massive shoulders.

“Philosophy and poetry and architecture are good enough in their way, but they are mist and smoke to conquest, for it is on the red splendor of conquest that all these things rest.”

The Vizier played with the ivory pawns, shaking his hoary head.

“My lord, you are like two men – one a builder, the other a destroyer.”

“Perhaps I destroy so that I may build on the ruins of my destruction,” the Amir answered. “I have never sought to reason out this matter. I only know that I am a conqueror before I am a builder, and conquest is my life’s blood.”

“But what reason to overthrow this great weak bulk of Cathay?” protested the Vizier. “It will mean but more slaughter, with which you have already crimsoned the earth – more wo and misery, with helpless people dying like sheep beneath the sword.”

Timour shook his head, half absently. “What are their lives? They die anyway, and their existence is full of misery. I will draw a band of iron about the heart of Tatary. With this Eastern conquest I will strengthen my throne, and kings of my dynasty shall rule the world for ten thousand years. All the roads of the world shall lead to Samarcand, and there shall be gathered the wonder and mystery and glory of the world – colleges and libraries and stately mosques – marble domes and sapphire towers and turquoise minarets. But first I shall carry out my destiny – and that is Conquest!”

“But winter draws on,” urged the Vizier. “At least wait until spring.”

Timour shook his head, unspeaking. He knew he was old; even his iron frame was showing signs of decay. And sometimes in his sleep he heard the singing of Aljai the Dark-eyed, the bride of his youth, dead for more than forty years. So through the Blue City ran the word, and men left their love-making and their wine-bibbing, strung their bows, looked to their harness and took up again the worn old road of conquest.

Timour and his chiefs took with them many of their wives and servants, for the Amir intended to halt at Otrar, his border city, and from thence strike into Cathay when the snows melted in the spring. Such of his lords as remained rode with him – war took a heavy toll of Timour’s hawks.

As usual Donald MacDeesa and his turbulent rogues led the advance. The Gael was glad to take the road after months of idleness, but he brought Zuleika with him. The years were growing more bitter for the giant Highlander, an outlander among alien races. His wild horsemen worshipped him in their savage way, but he was an alien among them, after all, and they could never understand his inmost thoughts. Ak Boga with his twinkling eyes and jovial laughter had been more like the men Donald had known in his youth, but Ak Boga was dead, his great heart stilled forever by the stroke of an Arab scimitar, and in his growing loneliness Donald more and more sought solace in the Persian girl, who could never understand his strange wayward heart, but who somehow partly filled an aching void in his soul. Through the long lonely nights his hands sought her slim form with a dim formless unquiet hunger even she could dimly sense.

In a strange silence Timour rode out of Samarcand at the head of his long glittering columns and the people did not cheer as of old. With bowed heads and hearts crowded with emotions they could not define, they watched the last conqueror ride forth, and then turned again to their petty lives and commonplace, dreary tasks, with a vague instinctive sense that something terrible and splendid and awesome had gone out of their lives forever.

In the teeth of the rising winter the hosts moved, not with the speed of other times when they passed through the land like wind-blown clouds. They were two hundred thousand strong and they bore with them herds of spare horses, wagons of supplies and great tent-pavilions.

Beyond the pass men call the Gates of Timour, snow fell, and into the teeth of the blizzard the army toiled doggedly. At last it became apparent that even Tatars could not march in such weather, and Prince Khalil went into winter quarters in that strange town called the Stone City, but Timour plunged on with his own troops. Ice lay three feet deep on the Syr when they crossed, and in the hill-country beyond the going became fiercer, and horses and camels stumbled through the drifts, the wagons lurching and rocking. But the will of Timour drove them grimly onward, and at last they came upon the plain and saw the spires of Otrar gleaming through the whirling snow-wrack.

Timour installed himself and his nobles in the palace, and his warriors went thankfully into winter quarters. But he sent for Donald MacDeesa.

“Ordushar lies in our road,” said Timour. “Take two thousand men and storm that city that our road be clear to Cathay with the coming of spring.”

When a man casts a javelin he little cares if it splinter on the mark. Timour would not have sent his valued emirs and chosen warriors on this, the maddest quest he had yet given even Donald. But the Gael cared not; he was more than ready to ride on any adventure which might drown the dim bitter dreams that gnawed deeper and deeper at his heart. At the age of forty MacDeesa’s iron frame was unweakened, his ferocious valor undimmed. But at times he felt old in his heart. His thoughts turned more and more back over the black and crimson pattern of his life with its violence and treachery and savagery; its wo and waste and stark futility. He slept fitfully and seemed to hear half-forgotten voices crying in the night. Sometimes it seemed the keening of Highland pipes skirled through the howling winds.

He roused his wolves, who gaped at the command but obeyed without comment, and rode out of Otrar in a roaring blizzard. It was a venture of the damned.

In the palace of Otrar, Timour drowsed on his divan over his maps and charts, and listened drowsily to the everlasting disputes between the women of his household. The intrigues and jealousies of the Samarcand palaces reached to isolated Otrar. They buzzed about him, wearying him to death with their petty spite. As age stole on the iron Amir, the women looked eagerly to his naming of a successor – his queen Sarai Mulkh Khanum; Khan Zade, wife of his dead son Jahangir. Against the queen’s claim for her son – and Timour’s – Shah Ruhk, was opposed the intrigue of Khan Zade for her son, Prince Khalil, whom the courtezan Shadi Mulkh wrapped about her pink finger.

The Amir had brought Shadi Mulkh with him to Otrar, much against Khalil’s will. The Prince was growing restless in the bleak Stone City and hints reached Timour of discord and threats of insubordination. Sarai Khanum came to the Amir, a gaunt weary woman, grown old in wars and grief.

“The Persian girl sends secret messages to Prince Khalil, stirring him up to deeds of folly,” said the Great Lady. “You are far from Samarcand. Were Khalil to march thither before you – there are always fools ready to revolt, even against the Lord of Lords.”

“At another time,” said Timour wearily, “I would have her strangled. But Khalil in his folly would rise against me, and a revolt at this time, however

quickly put down, would upset all my plans. Have her confined and closely guarded, so that she can send no more messages."

"This I have already done," replied Sarai Khanum grimly, "but she is clever and manages to get messages out of the palace by means of the Persian girl of the Caphar, lord Donald."

"Fetch this girl," ordered Timour, laying aside his maps with a sigh.

They dragged Zuleika before the Amir, who looked somberly upon her as she grovelled whimpering at his feet, and with a weary gesture, sealed her doom – and immediately forgot her, as a king forgets the fly he has crushed.

They dragged the girl screaming from the imperial presence and hurled her upon her knees in a hall which had no windows and only bolted doors. Grovelling on her knees she wailed frantically for Donald and screamed for mercy, until terror froze her voice in her pulsing throat, and through a mist of horror she saw the stark half-naked figure and the mask-like face of the grim executioner advancing, knife in hand.…

Zuleika was neither brave nor admirable. She neither lived with dignity nor met her fate with courage. She was cowardly, immoral and foolish. But even a fly loves life, and a worm would cry out under the heel that crushed it. And perhaps, in the grim inscrutable books of Fate, even an emperor may not forever trample insects with impunity.

VIII

"But I have dreamed a dreary dream,
Beyond the Vale of Skye;
I saw a dead man win a fight,
And I think that man was I."

– The Battle of Otterbourne

And at Ordushar the siege dragged on. In the freezing winds that swept down the pass, driving snow in blinding, biting blasts, the stocky Kalmucks and the lean Vigurs strove and suffered and died in bitter anguish. They set scaling-ladders against the walls and struggled upward, and the defenders, suffering no less, speared them, hurled down boulders that crushed the mailed figures like beetles, and thrust the ladders from the walls so that they crashed down, bearing death to men below. Ordushar was actually but a stronghold of the Jat Mongols, set sheer in the pass and flanked by towering cliffs.

Donald's wolves hacked at the frozen ground with frost-bitten raw hands which scarce could hold the picks, striving to sink a mine under the walls. They pecked at the towers while molten lead and weighted javelins fell in a rain upon them; driving their spear-points between the stones, tearing out pieces of masonry with their naked hands. With stupendous toil they had constructed makeshift siege-engines from felled trees and the leather of their harness and woven hair from the manes and tails of their war-horses. The rams battered vainly at the massive stones, the ballistas groaned as they launched tree-trunks and boulders against the towers or over the walls. Along the parapets the attackers fought with the defenders, until their bleeding hands froze to spear-shaft and sword-hilt, and the skin came away in great raw strips. And always, with superhuman fury rising above their agony, the defenders hurled back the attack.

A storming-tower was built and rolled up to the walls, and from the battlements the men of Ordushar poured a drenching torrent of naphtha that sent it up in flame and burnt the men in it, shriveling them in their armor like beetles in a fire. Snow and sleet fell in blinding flurries, freezing to sheets of ice. Dead men froze stiffly where they fell, and wounded men died

in their sleeping-furs. There was no rest, no surcease from agony. Days and nights merged into a hell of pain. Donald's men, with tears of suffering frozen on their faces, beat frenziedly against the frosty stone walls, fought with raw hands gripping broken weapons, and died cursing the gods that created them.

The misery inside the city was no less, for there was no more food. At night Donald's warriors heard the wailing of the starving people in the streets. At last in desperation the men of Ordushar cut the throats of their women and children and sallied forth, and the haggard Tatars fell on them weeping with the madness of rage and wo, and in a welter of battle that crimsoned the frozen snow, drove them back through the city gates. And the struggle went hideously on.

Donald used up the last wood in the vicinity to erect another storming-tower higher than the city-wall. After that there was no more wood for the fires. He himself stood at the uplifted bridge which was to be lowered to rest on the parapets. He had not spared himself. Day and night he had toiled beside his men, suffering as they had suffered. The tower was rolled to the wall in a hail of arrows that slew half the warriors who had not found shelter behind the thick bulwark. A crude cannon bellowed from the walls, but the clumsy round shot whistled over their heads. The naphtha and Greek fire of the Jats was exhausted. In the teeth of the singing shafts the bridge was dropped.

Drawing his claymore, Donald strode out upon it. Arrows broke on his corselet and glanced from his helmet. Firelocks flashed and bellowed in his face but he strode on unhurt. Lean armored men with eyes like mad dogs' swarmed upon the parapet, seeking to dislodge the bridge, to hack it asunder. Among them Donald sprang, his claymore whistling. The great blade sheared through mail-mesh, flesh and bone, and the struggling clump fell apart. Donald staggered on the edge of the wall as a heavy ax crashed on his shield, and he struck back, cleaving the wielder's spine. The Gael recovered his balance, tossing away his riven shield. His wolves were swarming over the bridge behind him, hurling the defenders from the parapet, cutting them down. Into a swirl of battle Donald strode, swinging his heavy blade. He thought fleetingly of Zuleika, as men in the madness of battle will think of irrelevant things, and it was as if the thought of her had hurt him fiercely under the heart. But it was a spear that had girded through his mail, and Donald struck back savagely; the claymore splintered in his

hand and he leaned against the parapet, his face briefly contorted. Around him swept the tides of slaughter as the pent-up fury of his warriors, maddened by the long weeks of suffering, burst all bounds.

IX

"While the red flashing of the light
From clouds that hung, like banners, o'er,
Appeared to my half-closing eye
The pageantry of monarchy."

– Poe: *Tamerlane*

To Timour on his throne in the palace of Otrar came the Grand Vizier. "The survivors of the men sent to the Pass of Ordushar are returning, my lord. The city in the mountains is no more. They bear the lord Donald on a litter, and he is dying."

They brought the litter into Timour's presence, weary, dull-eyed men, with raw wounds tied up with blood-crusted rags, their garments and mail in tatters. They flung before the Amir's feet the golden-scaled corselets of chiefs, and chests of jewels and robes of silk and silver braid; the loot of Ordushar where men had starved among riches. And they set the litter down before Timour.

The Amir looked at the form of Donald. The Highlander was pale, but his sinister face showed no hint of weakness in that wild spirit, his cold eyes gleamed unquenched.

"The road to Cathay is clear," said Donald, speaking with difficulty. "Ordushar lies in smoking ruins. I have carried out your last command."

Timour nodded, his eyes seeming to gaze through and beyond the Highlander. What was a dying man on a litter to the Amir, who had seen so many die? His mind was on the road to Cathay and the purple kingdoms beyond. The javelin had shattered at last, but its final cast had opened the imperial path. Timour's dark eyes burned with strange depths and leaping shadows, as the old fire stole through his blood. Conquest! Outside the winds howled, as if trumpeting the roar of nakars, the clash of cymbals, the deep-throated chant of victory.

"Send Zuleika to me," the dying man muttered. Timour did not reply; he scarcely heard, sitting lost in thunderous visions. He had already forgotten Zuleika and her fate. What was one death in the awesome and terrible scheme of empire.

“Zuleika, where is Zuleika?” the Gael repeated, moving restlessly on his litter. Timour shook himself slightly and lifted his head, remembering.

“I had her put to death,” he answered quietly. “It was necessary.”

“Necessary!” Donald strove to rear upright, his eyes terrible, but fell back, gagging, and spat out a mouthful of crimson. “You bloody dog, she was mine!”

“Yours or another’s,” Timour rejoined absently, his mind far away. “What is a woman in the plan of imperial destinies?”

For answer Donald plucked a pistol from among his robes and fired point-blank. Timour started and swayed on his throne, and the courtiers cried out, paralyzed with horror. Through the drifting smoke they saw that Donald lay dead on the litter, his thin lips frozen in a grim smile. Timour sat crumpled on his throne, one hand gripping his breast; through those fingers blood oozed darkly. With his free hand he waved back his nobles.

“Enough; it is finished. To every man comes the end of the road. Let Pir Muhammad reign in my stead, and let him strengthen the lines of the empire I have reared with my hands.”

A rack of agony twisted his features. “Allah, that this should be the end of empire!” It was a fierce cry of anguish from his inmost soul. “That I, who have trodden upon kingdoms and humbled sultans, come to my doom because of a cringing trull and a Caphar renegade!” His helpless chiefs saw his mighty hands clench like iron as he held death at bay by the sheer power of his unconquered will. The fatalism of his accepted creed had never found resting-place in his instinctively pagan soul; he was a fighter to the red end.

“Let not my people know that Timour died by the hand of a Caphar,” he spoke with growing difficulty. “Let not the chronicles of the ages blazon the name of a wolf that slew an emperor. Ah God, that a bit of dust and metal can dash the Conqueror of the World into the dark! Write, scribe, that this day, by the hand of no man, but by the will of Allah, died Timour, Servant of God.”

The chiefs stood about in dazed silence, while the pallid scribe took up parchment and wrote with a shaking hand. Timour’s somber eyes were fixed on Donald’s still features that seemed to give back his stare, as the dead on the litter faced the dying on the throne. And before the scratching of the quill had ceased, Timour’s lion head had sunk upon his mighty chest. And without the wind howled a dirge, drifting the snow higher and higher

about the walls of Otrar, even as the sands of oblivion drifted already about the crumbling empire of Timour, the Last Conqueror, Lord of the World.

Timur-Lang

The warm wind blows through the waving grain –
Where are the glories of Tamerlane?
The nations stood up, ripe and tall –
He was the sickle that reaped them all.
But the sickle shatters and leaves no trace –
And the grain grows green on the desert’s face.

Sword Woman

To Mary Read, Graine O'Malley, Jeanne Laisné, Liliard of Ancrum, Anne Bonney, and all other sword women, good or bad, bold or gay, who have swaggered down the centuries, this chronicle is respectfully dedicated.

I
Res Adventura

“Agnès! You red-haired spawn of the devil, where are you?” It was my father calling me, after his usual fashion. I raked my sweat-dampened hair out of my eyes and heaved the bundle of fagots back on my shoulder. Little of rest was there in my life.

My father parted the bushes and came into the glade – a tall man, gaunt and bitter, darkened with the suns of many campaigns, marked with scars gotten in the service of greedy kings and avaricious dukes. He scowled at me, and faith, I would hardly have recognized him had he worn another expression.

“What are you about?” he snarled.

“You sent me into the forest for wood,” I answered sullenly.

“Did I bid you begone a whole day?” he roared, aiming a slap at my head which I avoided with a skill born of much practice. “Have you forgot this is your wedding day?”

At that my fingers went limp and the cord slipped through them, so the bundle of fagots tumbled to the ground and burst apart. The gold went out of the sunlight, and the joy from the trilling of the birds.

“I had forgot,” I whispered, from lips suddenly dry.

“Well, take up your sticks and come along,” he scowled. “The sun heels westward. Ungrateful wench – accursed jade! – that your father should be forced to drag his old bones through the forest to bring you to your husband.”

“Husband!” I muttered. “François! Hoofs of the devil!”

“Will you swear, wench?” snarled my father. “Must I lesson you again? Will you flout the man I have chosen for you? François is as fine a young man as you can find in all Normandy.”

“A fat pig,” I muttered, “a very munching, guzzling, nuzzling swine!”

“Be silent!” he yelled. “He will be a prop to my old age. I can not much longer guide the plough handles. My old wounds pain me. Your sister Ysabel’s husband is a dog; he will give me no aid. François will be different. He will tame you, I warrant me. He will not humor you, as have I. You will eat stick from his hand, my fine lady.”

At that a red mist waved across my sight. It was ever thus at such talk of taming. I dashed down the fagots I had mechanically taken up, and all the fire in my blood rushed to my lips.

"May he rot in hell, and you with him!" I shrieked. "I'll *not* wed him. Beat me – kill me! Use me as you wish! But I'll never share François' bed!"

At that hell flamed into my father's eyes, so that I should have trembled but for the madness that gripped me. I saw mirrored there all the fury and violence and passion that had been his when he looted and murdered and raped as a Free Companion. With a wordless roar he lunged for me and dealt a buffet at my head with his right fist. I avoided the blow, and he smote with his left. Again his fist flailed empty air as I dodged, and then with a cry like the yell of a wolf, he caught my loose hair in his fingers, wrapping the tresses around his hand and wrenching my head back until it seemed my neck would break; and he smote me on the chin with his clubbed right fist, so that the sunlight went out in a wave of blackness.

I must have been senseless for some time – long enough for my father to drag me through the forest and into the village by the hair of my head. Regaining consciousness after a beating was no new experience, but I was sick and weak and dizzy, and my limbs ached from the rough ground over which he had dragged me. I was lying in our wretched hut, and when I staggered up into a sitting position, I found that my plain woolen tunic had been taken from me, and that I was decked in wedding finery. By Saint Denis, the feel of it was more loathsome than the slimy touch of a serpent, and a quick panic assailed me, so I would have torn it from me; but then a giddiness and a sickness overcame me, and I sank back with a groan. And blackness deeper than that of a bruised brain sank over me, in which I saw myself caught in a trap in which I struggled in vain. All strength flowed out of me, and I would have wept if I could. But I never could weep; and now I was too crushed to curse, and I lay staring dumbly at the rat-gnawed beams of the hut.

Then I was aware that someone had entered the room. From without sounded a noise of talking and laughter, as the people gathered. The one who had come into the hut was my sister Ysabel, bearing her youngest child on her hip. She looked down at me, and I noted how bent and stooped she was, and how gnarled from toil her hands, and how lined her features from weariness and pain. The holiday garments she wore seemed to bring these

things out; I had not noticed them when she wore her usual peasant woman's attire.

"They make ready for the wedding, Agnès," she said, in her hesitant way. I did not reply. She set down the baby and knelt beside me, looking into my face with a strange wistfulness.

"You are young and strong and fresh, Agnès," she said, yet as though she spake more to herself than to me. "Almost beautiful in your wedding finery. Are you not happy?"

I closed my eyes wearily.

"You should laugh and be gay," she sighed – it seemed she moaned, rather. " 'Tis but once in a girl's life. You do not love François. But I did not love Guillaume. Life is a hard thing for a woman. Your tall, supple body will grow bent like mine, and broken with child-bearing; your hands will become twisted – and your mind will grow strange and grey – with the toil and the weariness – and the everlasting face of a man you hate – "

At that I opened my eyes and stared up at her.

"I am but a few years older than you, Agnès," she murmured. "Yet look at me. Would you become as I?"

"What can a girl do?" I asked helplessly.

Her eyes burned into mine with a shadow of the fierceness I had so often seen smolder in the eyes of our father.

"One thing!" she whispered. "The only thing a woman can do, to free herself. Do not cling by your fingers to life, to become as our mother, and as your sister; do not live to become as me. Go while you are strong and supple and handsome. Here!"

She bent quickly, pressed something into my hand, then snatched up the child and was gone. And I lay staring fixedly at the slim-bladed dagger in my hand.

I stared up at the dingy rafters, and I knew her meaning. But as I lay there with my fingers curled about the slender hilt, strange new thoughts flooded my mind. The touch of that hilt sent a tingling through the veins of my arm; a strange sense of familiarity, as if its feel started a dim train of associations I could not understand but somehow felt. Never had I fingered a weapon before, or any edged thing more than a woodsman's axe or a cabbage knife. This slim lethal thing shimmering in my hand seemed somehow like an old friend come home again.

Outside the door voices rose and feet shuffled, and I quickly slipped the dagger into my bosom. The door opened and fingers caught at the jamb, and faces leered at me. I saw my mother, stolid, colorless, a work animal with the emotions of a work animal, and over her shoulder, my sister. And I saw sudden disappointment and a haunting sorrow flood her expression as she saw me still alive; and she turned away.

But the others flooded into the hut and dragged me from the bunk, laughing and shouting in their peasant hilarity. Whether they put down my reluctance to virginal shyness, or knew my hatred for François, mattered little. My father's iron grasp was on one wrist, and some great mare of a loud-mouthed woman had my other wrist, and so they dragged me forth from the hut into a ring of shouting, laughing folk, who were already more than half drunk, men and women. Their rude jests and obscene comments fell on heedless ears. I was fighting like a wild thing, blind and reasonless, and it took all the strength of my captors to drag me along. I heard my father cursing me under his breath, and he twisted my wrist till it was like to break, but all he got out of me was a panting oath that consigned his soul to the hell it deserved.

I saw the priest coming forward, a wizened, blinking old fool, whom I hated as I hated them all. And François was coming to meet me – François, in new jerkin and breeches, with a chain of flowers about his fat red neck, and the smirk on his thick distended lips that made my flesh crawl. There he stood, grinning like a mindless ape, yet with vindictive triumph and lustful meaning in his little pig eyes.

At the sight of him I ceased my struggles like one struck motionless, and my captors released me and drew back; and so I stood facing him for an instant, almost crouching, glaring unspeaking. "Kiss her, lad!" bellowed some drunken lout; and then as a taut spring snaps, I jerked the dagger from my bosom and sprang at François. My act was too quick for those slow-witted clowns even to comprehend, much less prevent. My dagger was sheathed in his pig's heart before he realized I had struck, and I yelped with mad glee to see the stupid expression of incredulous surprize and pain flood his red countenance, as I tore the dagger free and he fell, gurgling like a stuck pig, and spouting blood between his clawing fingers – to which clung petals from his bridal chain.

What has taken long to tell needed but an instant to transpire. I leapt, struck, tore away and fled, all in an instant. My father, the soldier, quicker

in wit and action than the others, yelled and sprang to catch me, but his groping hands closed on empty air. I shot through the startled crowd and into the forest, and as I gained the trees, my father caught up a bow and let fly at me. I shrank aside and the arrow thudded venomously into a tree.

“Drunken fool!” I cried, with a shriek of wild laughter. “You are in your dotage, to miss such a mark!”

“Come back, you slut!” he roared, mad with passion.

“To the fires of hell with you,” I retorted, “and may the devil feast upon your black heart!” And that was my farewell to my father, as I turned and fled through the forest.

How far I fled I do not know. Behind me I heard the howls of the villagers, and their stumbling and blundering pursuit. Then only the yells, and those distant and far away, and then even they faded out. For few of my brave villagers had stomach to follow me into the deep woods, where the shadows were already stealing. I ran until my breath was jerked out of me in racking gasps, and my knees buckled, hurling me headlong in the soft leaf-carpeted loam, where I lay in a half-faint, until the moon climbed up, sheathing the higher branches in frosty silver, and cutting out the shadows yet more blackly. About me I heard rustlings and movements that betokened beasts, and perchance worse – werewolves and goblins and vampires, for all I knew. Yet I was not afraid. I had slept in the forest ere now, when night caught me far from the village with a load of fagots, or my father in his drink had driven me forth from the hut.

I rose and went on through the moonlight and the darkness, taking scant heed of the direction, so I put as much distance as possible between me and the village. In the darkness before dawn sleep overcame me, and throwing myself on the loam, I fell into deep slumber, careless of whether beast or ghoul devoured me before day broke.

But when dawn rose over the forest, it found me alive and whole, and possessed of a ravenous hunger. I sat up, wondering for an instant at the strangeness of it all, then sight of my torn wedding robes and the blood-crusted dagger in my girdle brought it all back. And I laughed again as I remembered François’ expression as he fell, and a wild surge of freedom flooded me, so I felt like dancing and singing like a mad woman. But instead I cleansed the dagger on some fresh leaves, and putting it again in my girdle, I went toward the rising sun.

Presently I came upon a road which wound through the forest and was glad of it, because my wedding shoon, being shoddy things, were mostly worn out. I was accustomed to going barefoot, but even so, the briars and twigs of the forest hurt my feet.

The sun was not well up, when, coming to a curve in the road, which indeed was little more than a forest trail, I heard the sound of horse's hoofs. Instinct told me to hide in the bushes. But another instinct checked me. I searched my soul for fear and found it not. So I was standing in the middle of the path, unmoving, my dagger in my hand, when the horseman came around the bend, and pulled up short with a startled oath.

He stared at me and I gave back his glance, unspeaking. He was handsome in a dark way, somewhat above medium height, and rather slender. His horse was a fine black stallion, with trappings of red leather and bright metal, and he himself was clad in silk hosen and velvet doublet, somewhat shabby, with a scarlet cloak flung about him, and a feather in his cap. He wore no baldric, but a sword hung at his girdle in a worn leather sheath.

"By Saint Denis!" he exclaimed; "what sprite of the forest, or goddess of dawn are you, girl?"

"Who are you to ask?" I demanded, finding myself neither fearful nor overly timid.

"Why, I am Étienne Villiers, once of Aquitaine," he answered, and an instant later bit his lip and shook his head as if in irritation that he had so

spoken. He looked at me, then, from crown to slippers and back, and laughed.

“Out of what mad tale did you step?” he asked. “A red-haired girl in tattered wedding finery, dagger in hand, in the green woodlands just at sunrise! ’Tis better than a romaunt! Come, good wench, tell me the jest.”

“Here is no jest,” I muttered sullenly.

“But who are you?” he persisted.

“My name is Agnès de Chastillon,” I answered.

He laughed and slapped his thigh.

“A noble lady in disguise!” he mocked. “Saint Yves, the tale grows more spicy! From what shaded bower in what giant-guarded castle have you escaped, in these trappings of a peasant, my lady?” And he doffed his chaperon in a sweeping bow.

“I have as much right to the name as many who wear high-bellied titles,” I answered, angered. “My father was the bastard son of a peasant woman and the Duc de Chastillon. He has ever used the name, and his daughters after him. If you like not my name go your ways. I have not asked you to stop and mock me.”

“Nay, I did not mean to mock you,” he protested, his gaze running up and down my figure avidly. “By Saint Trignan, you fit a high and noble name better than many high born ladies I have seen simpering and languishing under it. Zeus and Apollo, but you are a tall lithe wench – a Norman peach, on my honor! I would be your friend; tell me why you are alone in the forest at this hour, with tattered wedding gown and worn shoes.”

He swung supply down from the tall horse, and stood cap in hand before me. His lips were not smiling now, and his dark eyes did not mock me, though meseemed they glowed with an inward vagrant fire. His words suddenly brought home to me how alone and helpless I was, with nowhere to turn. Perchance it was natural that I should unburden myself to the first friendly stranger – besides, Étienne Villiers had a manner about him which induced women to trust him –

“I fled last night from the village of la Fère,” I said. “They wished to wed me to a man I hated.”

“And you spent the night alone in the forest?”

“Why not?”

He shook his head as if he found it difficult of belief.

“But what will you do now?” he asked. “Have you friends near by?”

“I have no friends,” I answered. “I will go on until I die of starvation or something else befalls me.”

He mused awhile, tugging at his clean-shaven chin with thumb and forefinger. Thrice he lifted his head and swept his gaze over me, and once I thought I saw a darkling shadow pass over his features, making him for an instant appear almost like another man. Then he raised his head and spoke: “You are too handsome a girl to perish in the woods or be carried off by outlaws. If you will, I will take you to Chartres, where you can obtain employ as a serving wench and earn your keep. You can work?”

“No man in la Fère can do more,” I answered.

“By Saint Yves, I believe it,” he said, with an admiring shake of his head. “There is something almost pagan about you, with your height and suppleness. Come, will you trust me?”

“I would not cause you trouble,” I answered. “Men from la Fère will be following me.”

“Tush!” quoth he in scorn. “Who ever heard of a peasant going further than a league from his village? You are safe enough.”

“Not from my father,” I answered grimly. “He is no mere peasant. He has been a soldier. He will follow me far, and kill me when he finds me.”

“In that case,” muttered Étienne, “we must find a way to befool him. Ha! I have it! I mind me less than a mile back I passed a youth whose garments should fit you. Bide ye here until I return. We’ll make a boy of you!”

So saying he wheeled and thundered off, and I watched him, wondering if I should see him again, or if he but made sport of me. I waited, and the hoofs faded away in the distance. Silence reigned over the green wood, and I was aware of a fierce and gnawing hunger. Then, after what seemed an infinite time, again the hoofs beat through the forest, and Étienne Villiers galloped up, laughing gaily, and waving a bundle of clothes.

“Did you slay him?” I asked.

“Not I!” laughed Étienne. “I but sent him blubbering on his way naked as Adam. Here, wench, go into yonder copse and don these garments hastily. We must be on our way, and it is many a league to Chartres. Cast your maiden’s clothing out to me, and I will take them and leave them on the banks of that stream which runs through the forest a short way off. Mayhap they will be found, and men think you drowned.”

He was back before I had finished putting on the strange garments, and chatting to me through the screening bushes.

“Your revered father will be searching for a maid,” he laughed. “Not for a boy. When he asks the peasants if they have seen a tall red-haired wench, they will shake their bullet heads. Ha! ha! ha! ’Tis a good jest on the old villain.”

Presently I came forth from the bushes, and he stared hard at me where I stood in shirt, breeches and cap. The garments felt strange to me, but gave me a freedom I had never experienced in petticoats.

“Zeus!” he muttered. “ ’Tis less perfect disguise than I had hoped for. The blindest clod in the fields could tell ’twas no man those garments hid. Here: let me lop those red locks with my dagger; mayhap that will aid.”

But when he had cut my hair into a square mane that fell short of my shoulders, he shrugged his own shoulders.

“Even so you are all woman,” quoth he. “Yet perchance a stranger, passed hastily on the road, would be befooled. Yet we must chance it.”

“Why do you concern yourself over me?” I asked curiously; for I was unused to kindness.

“Why, by God,” quoth he, “would any man worthy of the name leave a young girl to wander and starve in the forest? My purse holds more copper than silver, and my velvet is worn, but Étienne Villiers holds his honor as high as any belted knight or castled baron; and never shall weakness suffer while his purse hold a coin or his scabbard a sword.”

Hearing these words I felt humble and strangely ashamed; for I was unlearned and untaught, and had no words to speak the gratitude I felt. I stumbled and stammered, and he smiled and gently chided me to silence, saying that he needed not thanks, for goodness carried its own reward.

Then he mounted and gave me a hand. I swung up behind him, and we thundered off down the road, I holding to his girdle, and half enveloped by his cloak which blew out behind him in the morning breeze. And I felt sure that any one seeing us thundering by, would swear it was a young man and a lad, instead of a man and a girl.

My hunger mounted with the sun, but the sensation was no uncommon one in my life, so I made no complaint. We were travelling in a south-eastward direction, and it seemed to me that as we progressed a strange nervousness made itself evident in Étienne. He spoke little, and kept to the less traveled roads, frequently following bridle-paths or wood-cutters’ trails that wound in and out among the trees. We met few folk, and they only

yokels with axe on shoulder or fagots on back, who gaped at us, and doffed their ragged caps.

Midday was nigh when we halted at a tavern – a woodland inn, lonely and isolated, the sign of which was poorly done, and almost obliterated; but Étienne called it the Knaves' Fingers. The host came forth, a stooped, hulking lout, with a twisted leer, wiping his hands on his greasy leather apron, and bobbing his bullet head.

"We desire food and lodging," said Étienne loudly. "I am Gérard de Bretagne, of Montauban, and this my young brother. We have been to Caen, and are travelling to Tours. Tend my horse and set a roasted capon on the table, host."

The host bobbed and mumbled, and took the stallion's rein. But he lingered as Étienne lifted me off, for I was stiff from the long ride, and I did not believe my disguise was as complete as I had hoped. For the long glance mine host cast at me was not such as a man gives a lad.

As we entered the tavern, we saw only one man seated on a settle and guzzling wine from a leathern jack – a fat, gross man, his belly bulging over his leather belt. He looked up as we entered, started and opened his mouth as if to speak. Étienne did not speak but looked full at him, and I saw or felt a quick spark of understanding pass between them. The fat man returned to his wine jack in silence, and Étienne and I made our way to the board on which a slatternly serving wench placed the capon ordered, pease, trenchoirs of bread, a great vessel of Caen tripe, and two flagons of wine.

I fell to avidly, with my dagger, but Étienne ate little. He toyed with his food, his gaze shifting from the fat man on the settle, who now seemed to sleep, back to me, and then out the dingy windows with their diamond-shaped panes, or even up to the heavy smoke-stained beams. But he drank much, refilling his flagon again and again, and finally asked me why I did not touch mine.

"I have been too busy eating to drink," I admitted, and took it up uncertainly, for I had never tasted wine before. All the liquor which ever found its way into our miserable hut, my father had guzzled himself. I emptied the flagon as I had seen him do, and choked and strangled, but found the tang pleasing to my palate.

Étienne swore under his breath.

"By Saint Michel, in all my life I never saw a woman drain a flagon like that! You will be drunk, girl."

“You forget I am a girl no longer,” I reproved in the same low tone. “Shall we ride on?”

He shook his head.

“We will remain here until morning. You must be weary and in need of rest.”

“My limbs are stiff because I am not used to riding,” I answered. “But I am not tired.”

“Never the less,” he said with a touch of impatience, “we shall rest here until tomorrow. I think it will be safe enough.”

“As you wish,” I replied. “I am utterly in your hands, and wish to do only as you bid in all things.”

“Well and good,” he said. “Naught becomes a young girl like cheerful obedience.” Lifting his voice he called to the host who was returned from the stables, and hovered in the background. “Host, my brother is weary. Bring him to a room where he can sleep. We have ridden far.”

“Aye, your honor!” the host bobbed and mumbled, rubbing his hands together; for Étienne had a way of impressing common folk with his importance, as if he were a count at the very least. But of that later.

The innkeeper shambled through a low-ceilinged room adjoining the tap-room, and which opened out upon the space back of the tavern, and he mounted a ladder which went up into another, more spacious room above. It was under the steep roof, and barely furnished, but even so more elaborate than anything to which I had ever been accustomed. I saw – for somehow I had begun instinctively to note such details – that the only entrance or egress was through the door which opened on to the ladder; there was but one window, and that too small even to admit my lithe form. And there was no bolt for the door from within. I saw Étienne scowl and shoot a quick suspicious glance at the innkeeper, but that lout did not seem to notice, rubbing his hands and discoursing on the excellent qualities of the den into which he had brought us.

“Sleep, brother,” said Étienne for our host’s benefit; then as he turned away, he whispered in my ear. “I trust him not; we will move on as soon as night falls. Rest meantime. I will come for you at dusk.”

Whether it was the wine, after all, or unsuspected weariness, I can not say; but laying myself down on the straw pallet in my clothing, I fell asleep before I knew it, and slumbered long.

II

What woke me was the gentle opening of the door. I wakened to darkness, relieved but little by the starlight in the tiny window. No one spoke, but something moved in the darkness. I heard a beam creak and thought I caught the sound of suppressed breathing.

"Is that you, Étienne?" I whispered. There was no answer, and I spoke a trifle louder. "Étienne! Is that you, Étienne Villiers?"

I thought I heard breath hiss softly between teeth, then the beam creaked again, and a stealthy shuffle receded from me. I heard the door open and close softly, and knew I was once more alone in the room. I sprang up, drawing my dagger. That had not been Étienne, coming for me as he had promised, and I wished to know who it was that had sought to creep upon me in the darkness.

Gliding to the door I opened it and gazed down into the lower room. There was only darkness, as if I looked into a well, but I heard someone moving across the room, and then a fumbling at the outer door. Taking my dagger in my teeth, I slid silently down the ladder, with an ease and stealth that surprized myself. As my feet touched the floor and I seized my dagger and crouched in the darkness, I saw the outer door swing open, and a bulk was framed in the opening for an instant. I recognized the stooped top-heavy figure of the innkeeper. He was breathing so heavily that he could not have heard the faint sounds I made. He ran clumsily but quickly across the court-like space behind the tavern, and I saw him vanish into the stables. I watched, straining my eyes in the dim starlight, and presently he came forth leading a horse. He did not mount the beast, but led him into the forest, showing every evidence of a desire for silence and secrecy. A short time after he had vanished, I caught the faint sound of a horse galloping. Evidently mine host had mounted after attaining a discreet distance from the inn, and was now riding hard to some unknown goal.

All I could think of was that somehow he recognized me, knew of me, and was riding to bear word to my father. I turned and opened the door a crack into the tap-room, and peered in. No one was there but the serving wench, asleep on the floor. A candle burned on the table, and moths fluttered about it. From somewhere there came a faint indistinct mumble of voices.

I glided out the back door and stole around the tavern. Silence hung over the black-shadowed forest, except for a faint far cry of a night bird, and the restless movement of the great stallion in his stall.

Candle light streamed from the window of a small room on the other side of the tavern, separated from the common-room by a short passage. As I glided past this window, I halted suddenly, hearing my name spoken. I nestled close to the wall, listening shamelessly. I heard the quick, clear though low-pitched voice of Étienne, and the rumble of another.

" – Agnès de Chastillon, she said. What does it matter what a peasant wench calls herself? Is she not a handsome baggage?"

"I've seen prettier in Paris, aye, and in Chartres, too," answered the rumbling voice, which came, I knew, from the fat man who had occupied the settle when we first entered the tavern.

"Pretty!" There was scorn in Étienne's voice. "The girl's more than pretty. There's something wild and untamable about her. Something fresh and vital, I tell you. Any worn-out noble would pay high for her; she would renew the youth of the most jaded debauchee. Look you, Thibault, I would not be offering you this prize, were it not that the risk is too great for me to ride on to Chartres with her. I am suspicious of this dog of an innkeeper, too."

"If he does recognize you as the man for whose head le duc d'Alençon yearns – " muttered Thibault.

"Be quiet, fool!" hissed Étienne. "That is another reason I must be rid of the wench. I was surprized into telling her my true name. But by the saints, Thibault, my meeting with her was enough to jolt the calm of a saint! I rounded a bend in the road, and there she stood, straight and tall against the green wood in her torn wedding gown, with her blue eyes smoldering, and the rising sun glinting red in her hair and turning to a streak of blood the dagger in her hand! For an instant I doubted me if she were human, and a strange thrill, almost of terror, swept over me."

"A country wench in a woods road frightens Étienne Villiers, a rake among rakes," snorted Thibault, drinking from a jack with a loud sucking noise.

"She was more than that," retorted Étienne. "There was something fateful about her, like a figure in a tragic drama; something terrible. She is fair, yet there is something strange and dark about her. I can not explain nor understand it."

“Enough, enough!” yawned Thibault. “You weave a romaunt about a Norman jade. Come to the point.”

“I have come to it,” snapped Étienne. “I had intended taking her on to Chartres and selling her to a brothel-keeper I wot of, myself; but I realize my folly. I would have to pass too close to the domain of le duc d’Alençon, and if he learned I was in the land – ”

“He has not forgotten,” grunted Thibault. “He would pay high for information regarding your whereabouts. He dares not arrest you openly; it will be a dagger in the dark, a shot from the bushes. He would close your mouth in secrecy and silence, if he might.”

“I know,” snarled Étienne with a shudder. “I was a fool to come this far east. Dawn shall find me far away. But you can take the girl to Chartres without fear, aye, or to Paris, for that matter. Give me the price I ask, and she is yours.”

“It is too high,” protested Thibault. “Suppose she fights like a wildcat?”

“That is your look out,” callously answered Étienne. “You have tamed enough wenches so you should be able to handle this one. Though I warn you, there is fire in the girl. But that is your business. You have told me your companions lie in a village not far from here. Get them to aid you. If you can not make a pretty profit of her in Chartres, or in Orléans, or in Paris, you are a greater fool than I am.”

“Well, well,” grumbled Thibault. “I’ll take a chance; after all, that is what a business man must do.”

I heard the clink of silver coins on the table, and the sound was like a knell to me.

And indeed it was my knell, for as I leaned blindly and sickly against the tavern wall, there died in me the girl I had been, and in her stead rose the woman I have become. My sickness passed, and cold fury turned me brittle as steel and pliant as fire.

“A drink to seal the bargain,” I heard Étienne say, “then I must ride. When you go for the wench – ”

I hurled open the door, and Étienne’s hand froze with the goblet at his lips. Thibault’s eyes bulged at me over the rim of his wine cup. A greeting died on Étienne’s lips, and he went suddenly pale at the death in my eyes.

“Agnès!” he exclaimed, rising. I stepped through the door and my blade was sheathed in Thibault’s heart before he could rise. An agonized grunt bubbled from his fat lips, and he sank from his bench, spurting red.

“Agnès!” cried Étienne again, throwing out his arms as if to fend me off. “Wait, girl – !”

“You filthy dog!” I screamed, blazing into mad fury. “You swine – swine – *swine!*” Only my own blind fury saved him as I rushed and stabbed.

I was on him before he could put himself into a position of defense, and my blindly driven steel tore the skin over his ribs. Thrice more I struck, silent and murderous, and he somehow fended the blade from his heart, though the point drew blood from hand, arm and shoulder. Desperately he grasped my wrist and sought to break it, and close-locked we tumbled against the table, over the edge of which he bent me and tried to strangle me. But to grasp my throat he must perforce release my wrist with one hand, and twisting it free of his single grip, I struck for his life. The point snapped on a metal buckle and the jagged shard tore through doublet and shirt, and ploughed along his breast; blood spurted and a groan escaped him. In anguish his grasp weakened, and I twisted from beneath him and dealt him a buffet with my clenched fist that rocked back his head and brought streams of blood from his nostrils. Groping for me he clutched me, and as I gouged at his eyes, he hurled me from him with such force that I hurtled backward across the room and crashed into the wall, thence toppling to the floor.

I was half dazed, but I rebounded with a snarl, gripping a broken table leg. He was wiping blood from his eyes with one hand and fumbling for his sword with the other, but again he misjudged the speed of my attack, and the table leg crashed full on his crown, laying open the scalp and bringing blood in torrents. He threw up his arms to ward off the strokes, and on them and on his head I rained blow after blow, driving him backward, half bent, blind and reeling, until he crashed down into the ruins of the table.

“God, girl,” he whimpered, “would you slay me?”

“With a joyful heart!” I laughed, as I had never laughed before, and I struck him over the ear, knocking him back down among the ruins out of which he was groping.

A moaning cry sobbed through his crushed lips. “In God’s name, girl,” he moaned, extending his hands blindly toward me, “have mercy! Hold your hand, in the name of the saints! I am not fit to die!”

He struggled to his knees, streaming blood from his battered head, his garments dripping crimson. “Hold your hand, Agnès,” he croaked. “Pity, in God’s name!”

I hesitated, staring somberly down at him. Then I threw aside my bludgeon.

“Take your life,” I said in bitter scorn. “You are too poor a thing to stain my hands. Go your ways!”

He sought to rise, then sank down again.

“I can not rise,” he groaned. “The room swims to my gaze, and grows dark. Oh, Agnès, it is a bitter kiss you have given me! God have mercy on me, for I die in sin. I have laughed at death, but now that it is upon me, I am afraid. Ah, God, I fear! Leave me not, Agnès! Leave me not to die like a dog!”

“Why should I not?” I asked bitterly. “I trusted you, and thought you nobler than common men, with your lying words of chivalry and honor. Pah! You would have sold me into slavery viler than a Turk’s harem.”

“I know,” he moaned. “My soul is blacker than the night that steals upon me. Call the innkeeper and let him fetch a priest.”

“He is gone on some mission of his own,” I answered. “He stole out the back door and rode into the forest.”

“He is gone to betray me to the Duke of Alençon,” muttered Étienne. “He recognized me, after all. I am indeed lost.”

Now it came to me that it was because of my calling Étienne’s name in the darkness of the room above that the innkeeper became aware of my false friend’s true identity. So it might be said that if the Duke laid Étienne by the heels, it would be because of my unconscious betrayal. And like most country people, I had only fear and distrust of the nobility.

“I’ll take you hence,” I said. “Not even a dog shall fall into the hands of the law by my will.”

I left the tavern hurriedly and went to the stables. Of the slattern I saw nothing. Either she had fled to the woods, or else was too drunk to heed. I saddled and bridled Étienne’s stallion, though it laid back its ears and snapped and kicked at me, and led it to the door. Then I went within and spoke to Étienne; and indeed a fearsome sight he was, bruised and battered, with tattered doublet and shirt, and all covered with blood.

“I have brought your horse,” I said.

“I can not rise,” he mumbled.

“Set your teeth,” I commanded. “I will carry you.”

“You can never do it, girl,” he protested, but even as he spoke, I heaved him up on my shoulders and bore him through the door, and a dead weight

he was, with limbs trailing like a dead man's. Getting him upon the horse was a heart-breaking task, for it was little he could do to aid himself, but at last it was accomplished, and I swung up behind the saddle and held him in place.

Then, as I hesitated, in doubt as to where to go, he seemed to sense my uncertainty, for he mumbled: "Take the road westward, to Saint Girault. There is a tavern there, a mile this side the town, the Red Boar, whose keeper is my friend."

Of that ride through the night, I will speak but briefly. We met no one, riding through a ribbon of starlight, walled by black forest trees. My hands grew sticky with Étienne's blood, for the jolting of the pace set his many wounds to bleeding afresh, and presently he grew delirious and spake disjointedly of other times and people strange to me. Anon he mentioned names known to me by reputation, lords, ladies, soldiers, outlaws and pirates, and he raved of dark deeds and sordid crimes and feats of curious heroism. And betimes he sang snatches of marching songs and drinking songs and bawdy ballads and love lyrics, and maundered in alien tongues unintelligible to me. Ah – I have ridden many roads since that night, of intrigue or violence, but never stranger ride rode I than that ride in the night through the forest to Saint Girault.

Dawn was a hint in the branch-scarred sky when I drew up at a tavern I believed was the one Étienne meant. The picture on the board proved such to be the case, and I shouted for the keeper. A lout of a boy came forth in his shirt, yawning, and digging his fists into his sluggish eyes, and when he saw the great stallion and its riders, all dabbled and splashed with blood, he bawled with fear and amaze and scudded back into the tavern with his shirt tail flapping about his rump. Presently then a window was cautiously pushed open upstairs, and a night-capped head was thrust out behind the muzzle of a great arquebuse.

"Go your ways," quoth the night-cap, "we have no dealings with bandits and bloody murderers."

"Here are no bandits," I answered angrily, being weary and short of patience. "Here is a man who has been set upon and nearly slain. If you are the innkeeper of the Red Boar, he is a friend of yours – Étienne Villiers, of Aquitaine."

"Étienne!" exclaimed mine host. "I will be down. Assuredly I will be down. Why did you not say it was Étienne?"

The window slammed and there was a sound of stairs being rapidly descended. I slid from the stallion and received Étienne's toppling form in my arms, easing him to the ground as the keeper rushed forth with servants bearing torches.

Étienne lay like one dead, his face livid where it was not masked with blood, but his heart beat strongly, and I knew he was partly conscious.

"Who did this, in God's name?" demanded mine host in horror.

"I did," I answered shortly. He gave back from me, paling in the torchlight.

"God ha' mercy on us! A youth like – holy Denis protect us! It's a woman!"

"Enough of this babble!" I exclaimed, angered. "Take him up and bear him into your best chamber."

"B-b-but – " began mine host, still bewildered, while the menials backed away.

I stamped my foot and swore, which is a custom always common to me.

"Death of the devil and Judas Iscariot!" quoth I. "Will you allow your friend to die while you gape and stare? Take him up!" I laid hand on his dagger, which I had girdled to mine own waist, and they hastened to obey me, staring as though I were the arch-fiend's daughter.

"Étienne is always welcome," mumbled mine host, "but a she-devil in breeches – "

"You will wear your own longer if you talk less and work more," I assured him, plucking a bell-mouthed pistol from the girdle of a servant who was too frightened even to remember he had it. "Do as I say, and there will be no more slaying tonight. Onward!"

Aye, verily, the happenings of the night had matured me. I was not yet fully a woman, but on the way to being one.

They bore Étienne to what mine host – whose name was Perducas – swore was the best chamber in the tavern, and sooth to say, it was much finer than anything in the Knave's Fingers. It was an upper room, opening out upon the landing of a winding stair, and it had windows of a proper size, though no other door.

Perducas swore that he was as good a leech as any man, and we stripped Étienne and set to work reviving him. Indeed, he showed to be as roughly handled as any man I had ever seen, not to be mortally wounded. But when we had washed the blood and dust off his body, we found that none of his

dagger-wounds had touched a vital spot, nor was his skull fractured, though the scalp had been split in several places. His right arm was broken, and the other black with bruises, and the broken bone we set, I helping Perducas with some skill, for accidents and wounds had always been common enough in la Fère.

When we had his wounds bandaged, and him laid in a clean bed, he recovered his senses enough to gulp wine and inquire where he was. When he told him, he muttered: “Leave me not, Agnès; Perducas is a man among men, but I require a woman’s tender care.”

“Saint Denis deliver me from such tender care as this hell-cat has shown,” quoth Perducas under his breath. And I said: “I will remain until you are upon your feet again, Étienne.” And he seemed satisfied therewith, and went into a calm slumber.

I then demanded a room for myself, and Perducas, having sent a boy to attend the stallion, showed me a chamber adjoining that of Étienne, though not connected with it by any door. I laid myself down on the bed just as the sun was coming up, it being the first feather bed I had ever seen, much less lain on, and slept for many hours.

When I came again to Étienne, I found him in full possession of his senses, and free of delirium. Indeed, in those days men were iron, and if their wounds were not instantly mortal, they quickly recovered, unless their hurts became poisoned through the carelessness or ignorance of the leeches. Perducas would have none of the nauseous and childish remedies praised by the physicians, but divers clean herbs and plants he gathered in the depths of the woods. He told me that he learned his art from the *hakims* of the Saracens, among whom he had travelled in his youth. He was a man of many unexpected sides, was Perducas.

Together he and I tended Étienne, who healed rapidly. Little speech passed between us. He and Perducas talked much together, but much of the time Étienne merely lay and looked silently at me.

Perducas talked to me a little, but seemed to fear me. When I spoke of my score, he replied that I owed him naught; that as long as Étienne desired my presence, food and lodging were mine, without pay. But he earnestly desired me not to converse with the town’s people, lest their curiosity lead to the discovery of Étienne. His servants, he said, could be trusted to silence. I asked him naught of the reason for le duc d’Alençon’s hatred for Étienne, but, quoth he: “It is no common score which the Duke holdeth

against Étienne Villiers. Étienne was once in this nobleman's train, and was unwise enough to perform for him a most delicate mission. D'Alençon is ambitious; 'tis whispered that naught but the rank of constable of France will satisfy him. He is now high in favor with the king; that favor might not shine with such lustre were it known what letters once passed between the Duke and Charles of Germany, whom men now know as the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

"Étienne alone knows the full extent of that plotted treason. Therefore d'Alençon burns for Étienne's death, yet dares not strike openly, lest his victim damn him forever with his dying breath. He would strike subtly and silently, by hidden dagger, poison or ambush. As long as Étienne is within his reach, Étienne's only safety lies in secrecy."

"Suppose there are others like that rogue Thibault?" I demanded.

"Nay," quoth he. " 'Tis no doubt there are. I know that band of gallows' bait well. But 'tis their one point of honor that they betray not one of their comrades. And in time past Étienne was one of them – cut-purses, woman-snatchers, thieves and murderers that they are."

I shook my head, musing on the strangeness of men, insomuch that Perducas, an honest man, was friend to a rogue like Étienne, knowing well his villainies. Well, many an honest man secretly admires a rogue, seeing in him that which he himself would be, if he lacked not the courage.

Ah well, I heeded well Perducas' desires, and time dragged heavily on my hands. I seldom left the tavern, save at night, and then only to wander in the woods, avoiding the people of the country-side and of the market-town. And a growing restlessness stirred me, and a feeling that I was waiting for something I knew not what, and that I should be up and doing – I knew not what.

A week had passed in this manner, when I met Guiscard de Clisson.

III

> Beyond the creak of rat-gnawed beams in squalid peasant huts:
> Above the groan of ox-wain wheels that ground the muddy ruts:
> I heard the beat of distant drums that called me night and day
> To roads where armored captains ride, in steel and roses panoplied,
> With banners flowing crimson-dyed – over the world away!
>
> *– Drums in My Ears*

I entered into the tavern one morning, after an early walk in the woods, and halted at the sight of the stranger gnawing a beef-bone at the board. He too stopped short in his gorging and stared at me. He was a tall man, rangy and hard of frame. A scar seamed his lean features, and his grey eyes were cold as steel. He was, indeed, a man of steel, clad in cuirass, thigh-pieces and greaves. His broadsword lay across his knees, his morion rested on the bench beside him.

"By God!" quoth he. "Are you man or woman?"

"What do you think?" I asked, leaning my hands on the board and looking down at him.

"Only a fool would ask the question I asked," said he, with a shake of his head. "You are all woman; yet your attire strangely becomes you. A pistol in your girdle, too. You remind me of a woman I once knew; she marched and fought like a man, and died of a pistol ball on the field of battle. She was dark where you are fair, but there is something similar in the set of your chin, in your carriage – nay, I know not. Sit ye down and converse with me. I am Guiscard de Clisson. Have you heard of me?"

"Many a time," I answered, seating myself. "In my native village they tell tales of you. You are a leader of mercenaries and Free Companions."

"When men have guts enough to be led," quoth he, quaffing, and holding out the flagon to me. "Ha, by the tripe and blood of Judas, you guzzle like a man! Mayhap women are becoming men, for 'tis truth, by Saint Trignan, that men are become women these days. Not a recruit for my company have I gained in this province, where, in days I can remember, men fought for the

honor of following a captain of mercenaries. Death of Satan! With the Emperor gathering his accursed Lanzknecht to sweep de Lautrec out of Milan, and the king in such dire need of soldiers – to say nothing of the rich loot in Italy – every able-bodied Frenchman ought to be marching southward, by God! Ah, for the old-time spirit of men!"

Now as I looked at this war-scarred veteran, and heard his talk, my heart beat quick with a strange longing, and I seemed to hear, as I had heard so often in my dreams, the distant beating of drums.

"I will ride with you!" I exclaimed. "I am weary of being a woman. I will make one of your company!"

He laughed and slapped the board with his open hand, as if at a great jest.

"By Saint Denis, girl," quoth he, "you have a proper spirit, but it takes more than a pair of breeches to make a man."

"If that other woman of whom you spoke could march and fight, so can I!" I cried.

"Nay." He shook his head. "Black Margot of Avignon was one in a million. Forget this foolish fancy, girl. Don thy petticoats and become a proper woman once more. Then – well, in your proper place I might be glad to have you ride with me!"

Ripping out an oath that made him start, I sprang up, knocking my bench backward so it fell with a crash. I stood before him, clenching and unclenching my hands, seething with the rage that always rose quickly in me.

"Ever the man in men!" I said between my teeth. "Let a woman know her proper place: let her milk and spin and sew and bake and bear children, nor look beyond her threshold or the command of her lord and master! Bah! I spit on you all! There is no man alive who can face me with weapons and live, and before I die, I'll prove it to the world. Women! Cows! Slaves! Whimpering, cringing serfs, crouching to blows, revenging themselves by – taking their own lives, as my sister urged me to do. Ha! You deny me a place among men? By God, I'll live as I please and die as God wills, but if I'm not fit to be a man's comrade, at least I'll be no man's mistress. So go ye to hell, Guiscard de Clisson, and may the devil tear your heart!"

So saying I wheeled and strode away, leaving him gaping after me. I mounted the stair and came into Étienne's chamber, where I found him lying on his bed, much improved, though still pale and weak, and his arm like to be in its sling for weeks to come.

“How fares it with you?” I demanded.

“Well enough,” he answered, and after staring at me a space: “Agnès,” said he, “why did you spare my life when you could have taken it?”

“Because of the woman in me,” I answered morosely, “that can not bear to hear a helpless thing beg for life.”

“I deserved death at your hands,” he muttered, “more than Thibault. Why have you tended and cared for me?”

“I did not wish you to fall into the hands of the Duke because of me,” I answered, “since it was I who unwittingly betrayed you. And now you have asked me these questions, I will e’en ask you one: why be such a damnable rogue?”

“God knows,” he answered, closing his eyes. “I have never been anything else, as far back as I can remember, and my memory runs back to the gutters of Poitiers, where I snatched for crusts and lied for pennies as a child, and got my first knowledge of the ways of the world. I have been soldier, smuggler, pander, cut-throat, thief – always a black rogue. Saint Denis, some of my deeds have been too black to repeat. And yet somewhere, somehow, there has always been an Étienne Villiers hidden deep in the depths of the creature that is myself, untarnished by the rest of me. There lies remorse and fear, and makes for misery. So I begged for life when I should have welcomed death, and now lie here speaking truth when I should be framing lies for your seduction. Would I were all saint or all rogue.”

At that instant feet stamped on the stair, and rough voices rose. I sprang to bar the door, hearing Étienne’s name called, but he halted me with a lifted hand, harkened, then sank back with a sigh of relief.

“Nay, I recognize the voice. Enter, comrades!” he called.

Then into the chamber trooped a foul and ruffianly band, led by a pot-bellied rogue in enormous boots. Behind him came four others, ragged, scarred, with cropped ears, patched eyes, or flattened noses. They leered at me, and then glared at the man on the bed.

“So, Étienne Villiers,” said the fat rogue, “we ha’ found ye! Hiding from us is not so easy as hiding from le duc d’Alençon, eh, you dog?”

“What manner of talk is this, Tristan Pelligny?” demanded Étienne, in unfeigned astonishment. “Have you come to greet a wounded comrade, or – ”

“We have come to do justice on a rat!” roared Pelligny. He turned and ponderously indicated his raggamuffin crew, pointing a thick forefinger at each. “See ye here, Étienne Villiers? Jacques of the Warts, Gaston the Wolf, Jehan Crop-ear, and Conrad the German. And myself maketh five, good men and true, once your comrades, come to do justice upon you for foul murder!”

“You are mad!” exclaimed Étienne, struggling up on his elbows. “Whom have I murdered that you should be wroth thereat? When I was one of you did I not always bear my share of the toil and dangers of thievery, and divide the loot fairly?”

“We talk not now of loot!” bellowed Tristan. “We speak of our comrade Thibault Bazas, foully murdered by you in the tavern of the Knave’s Fingers!”

Étienne’s mouth started open, he hesitated, glanced in a startled way at me, then closed his mouth again. I started forward.

“Fools!” I exclaimed. “He did not slay that fat swine Thibault. *I* killed him!”

“Saint Denis!” laughed Tristan. “ ’Tis the wench in breeches of whom the slattern spoke! You slew Thibault? Ha! A pretty lie, but not convincing, to any who knew Thibault. The serving wench heard the fighting, and fled in

fright into the forest. When she dared to return, Thibault lay dead, and Étienne and his jade were riding away together. Nay, ’tis too plain. Étienne slew Thibault, doubtless over this very hussy. Well, when we have disposed of him, we will take care of his leman, eh lads?”

A babble of profane and obscene agreement answered him.

“Agnès,” said Étienne, “call Perducas.”

“Call and be damned,” said Tristan. “Perducas and all the servants are out in the stable, drenching Guiscard de Clisson’s nag. We’ll have our task done before they return. Here – stretch this traitor out on yonder bench. Before I cut his throat, I’d fain try my knife edge on other parts of him.”

He brushed me aside contemptuously, and strode to Étienne’s bed, followed close by the others. Étienne struggled upright, and Tristan struck him with clenched fist, knocking him down again. In that instant the room swam red to my gaze. With a leap I had Étienne’s sword in my hand and at the feel of the hilt, power and a strange confidence rushed like fire through my veins.

With a fierce exultant cry I ran at Tristan, and he wheeled, bellowing, fumbling at his sword. I cut that bellow short as my sword sheared through his thick neck muscles and he went down, spouting blood, his head hanging by a shred of flesh. The other ruffians gave tongue like a pack of hounds and turned on me in fear and fury. And remembering suddenly the pistol in my girdle, I plucked it forth and fired point-blank into the face of Jacques, blasting his skull into a red ruin. In the hanging smoke the others made at me, bawling foul curses.

There are actions to which we are born, and for which we have a talent exceding mere teaching. I, who had never before had a sword in my grasp, found it like a living thing in my hand, wielded by unguessed instinct. And I found, again, my quickness of eye and hand and foot was not to be matched by these dull clods. They bellowed and flailed blindly, wasting strength and motion, as if their swords were cleavers, while I smote in deadly silence, and with deadly certainty.

I do not remember much of that fight; it is a crimson haze in which a few details stand out. My thews were moving too swiftly for my brain to record, and I know not fully how, with what leaps, ducks, side-steps and parries I avoided those flailing blades. I know that I split the head of Conrad the German, as a man splits a melon, and his brains gushed sickeningly over the blade. And I remember that the one called Gaston the Wolf trusted too

much in a brigandine he wore among his rags, and that under my desperate stoke, the rusty links burst and he fell upon the floor with his bowels spilling out. Then, as in a red cloud, only Jehan was rushing at me, and flailing down with his sword. And I caught his descending wrist on my edge. His hand, holding the sword, jumped from his wrist on an arch of crimson, and as he stared stupidly at the spouting stump, I ran him through with such ferocity that the cross-piece struck hard against his breast, and I pitched over him as he fell.

I do not remember rising and wrenching free my blade. On wide-braced legs, sword trailing, I reeled among the corpses, then a deadly sickness overcame me, and I staggered to the window and leaning my head over the sill, retched fearfully. I found that blood was streaming down my arm from a slash in the shoulder, and my shirt was in ribbons. The room swam to my gaze, and the scent of fresh blood, swimming in the entrails of the slain, revolted me. As if through a mist I saw Étienne's white face.

Then there came a pound of feet on the stair and Guiscard de Clisson burst through the door, sword in hand, followed by Perducas. They stared like men struck dead, and de Clisson swore appallingly.

"Did I not tell you?" gasped Perducas. "The devil in breeches! Saint Denis, what a slaughter!"

"Is this your work, girl?" asked Guiscard in a strange small voice. I shook back my damp hair and struggled to my feet, swaying dizzily.

"Aye; it was a debt I had to pay."

"By God!" muttered he, staring. "There is something dark and strange about you, for all your fairness."

"Aye, Dark Agnès!" said Étienne, lifting himself on elbow. "A star of darkness shone on her birth, of darkness and unrest. Where ever she goes shall be blood spilling and men dying. I knew it when I saw her standing against the sunrise that turned to blood the dagger in her hand."

"I have paid my debt to you," I said. "If I placed your life in jeopardy, I have bought it back with blood." And casting his dripping sword at his feet, I turned toward the door.

Guiscard, who had been staring like one daft, shook himself as if from a trance, and strode after me.

"Nails of the Devil!" quoth he. "What has just passed has altered my mind entirely! You are such another as Black Margot of Avignon. A true sword-woman is worth a score of men. Would you still march with me?"

“As a companion-in-arms,” I answered. “I’m mistress to none.”
“None save Death,” he answered, glancing at the corpses.

IV

Her sisters bend above their looms
And gnaw their moldy crumbs:
But she rides forth in silk and steel
To follow the phantom drums.

– The Ballad of Dark Agnès

A week after the fight in Étienne's chamber, Guiscard de Clisson and I rode from the tavern of the Red Boar and took the road to the east. I bestrode a mettlesome destrier and was clad as became a comrade of de Clisson. Velvet doublet and silk trunk-hose I wore, with long Spanish boots; beneath my doublet pliant steel mail guarded my body, and a polished morion perched on my red locks. Pistols were in my girdle, and a sword hung from a richly-worked baldric. Over all was flung a cloak of crimson silk. These things Guiscard had purchased for me, swearing when I protested at his lavishness.

"Canst pay me back from the loot we take in Italy," said he. "But a comrade of Guiscard de Clisson must go bravely clad!"

Sometimes I misdoubt me that Guiscard's acceptance of me as a man was as complete as he would have had me think. Perchance he still secretly cherished his original idea – no matter.

That week had been a crowded one. For hours each day Guiscard had instructed me in the art of swordsmanship. He himself was accounted the finest blade in France, and he swore that he had never encountered apter pupil than I. I learned the rogueries of the blade as if I had been born to it, and the speed of my eye and hand often brought amazed oaths from his lips. For the rest, he had me shoot at marks with pistol and match-lock, and showed me many crafty and savage tricks of hand to hand fighting. No novice had ever more able teacher; no teacher had ever more eager pupil. I was afire with the urge to learn all pertaining to the trade. I seemed to have been born into a new world, and yet a world for which I was intended from birth. My former life seemed like a dream, soon to be forgotten.

So that early morning, the sun not yet up, we swung onto our horses in the courtyard of the Red Boar, while Perducas bade us God-speed. As we

reined around, a voice called my name, and I perceived a white face at an upper casement.

"Agnès!" cried Étienne. "Are you leaving without so much as bidding me farewell?"

"Why should there be such ceremony between us?" I asked. "There is no debt on either side. There should be no friendship, as far as I can see. You are well enough to tend yourself, and need my care no longer."

And saying no more, I reined away and rode with Guiscard up the winding forest road. He looked at me sidewise and shrugged his shoulders.

"A strange woman you are, Dark Agnès," quoth he. "You seem to move through life like one of the Fates, unmoved, unchangeable, potent with tragedy and doom. I think men who ride with you will not live long."

I did not reply, and so we rode on through the green wood. The sun came up, flooding the leaves with gold as they swayed in the morning wind; a deer flashed across the path ahead of us, and the birds were chanting their joy of Life.

We were following the road over which I had carried Étienne after the fight in the Knave's Fingers, but toward midday we turned off on another, broader road which slanted southeastward. Nor had we ridden far, after the turn, when: "Where man is not 'tis peaceful enough," quoth Guiscard, then: "What now?"

A fellow snoozing beneath a tree had woken, started up, stared at us, and then turning quickly aside, plunged among the great oaks which lined the road, and vanished. I had but a glimpse of him, seeing that he was an ill-visaged rogue, wearing the hood and smock of a wood-cutter.

"Our martial appearance frightened the clown," laughed Guiscard, but a strange uneasiness possessed me, causing me to stare nervously at the green forest walls that hemmed us in.

"There are no bandits in this forest," I muttered. "He had no cause to flee from us. I like it not. Hark!"

A high, shrill, quavering whistle rose in the air, from somewhere out among the trees. After a few seconds it was answered by another, far to the east, faint with distance. Straining my ears, I seemed to catch yet a third response, still further on.

"I like it not," I repeated.

"A bird calling its mate," he scoffed.

“I was born and raised in the forest,” I answered impatiently. “Yonder was no bird. Men are signalling one another out there in the forest. Somehow I believe ’tis connected with that rogue who fled from the path.”

“You have the instincts of an old soldier,” laughed Guiscard, doffing his helmet for the coolness and hanging it on his saddle bow. “Suspicious – alert – ’tis well enough. But your wariness is wasted in this wood, Agnès. I have no enemies hereabouts. Nay, I am well known and friend to all. And since there are no robbers nigh, it follows that we have naught to fear from anyone.”

“I tell you,” I protested as we rode on, “I have a haunting presentment that all is not well. Why should that rogue run from us, and then whistle to some hidden mate as we passed? Let us leave the road and take to a path.”

By this time we had passed some distance beyond where we had heard the first whistle, and had entered a broken region traversed by a shallow river. Here the road broadened out somewhat, though still walled by thick trees and bushes. On the left hand the bushes grew densely, close to the road. On the right hand they were straggling, bordering a shallow stream whose opposite bank rose in sheer cliffs. The brush-grown space between road and stream was perhaps a hundred paces broad.

“Agnès, girl,” Guiscard was saying, “I tell thee, we are as safe as – ”

Crash! A thundering volley ripped out of the bushes on the left, masking the road with whirling smoke. My horse screamed and I felt him stagger. I saw Guiscard de Clisson throw up his hands and sway backward in his saddle, then his horse reared and fell with him. All this I saw in a brief instant, for my horse bolted, crashing frantically through the bushes on the right hand side of the road, and a branch knocked me from the saddle, to lie half stunned among the bushes.

As I lay there, unable to see the road for the denseness of the covert, I heard loud rough voices, and the sound of men coming out of their ambush into the road.

“Dead as Judas Iscariot!” bawled one. “Where did the wench go?”

“Yonder goes her horse, splashing across the stream, gushing blood, and with empty saddle,” quoth another. “She fell among the bushes somewhere.”

“Would we could have taken her alive,” said yet another. “She would have furnished rare sport. But take no chances, the Duke said. Ah, here is Captain de Valence!”

There was a drumming of hoofs up the road, and the rider shouted: “I heard the volley; where is the girl?”

“Lying dead among the bushes somewhere,” he was answered. “Here is the man.”

An instant’s silence, then: “Thunders of hell!” roared the captain. “Fools! Bunglers! Dogs! *This is not Étienne Villiers!* You’ve murdered Guiscard de Clisson!”

A babble of confusion rose, curses, accusations and denials, dominated by the voice of him they called de Valence.

“I tell you, I would know de Clisson in hell, and this is he, for all his head is a mass of blood. Oh, you fools!”

“We but obeyed orders,” another growled. “When you heard the signal, you put us in ambush and bade us shoot who ever came down the road. How did we know who it was we were to murder? You never spoke his name; our business was but to shoot the man you should designate. Why did you not remain with us and see it well done?”

“Because this is the Duke’s service, fool!” snapped de Valence. “I am too well known. I could not take the chance of being seen and recognized, if the ambush failed.”

They then turned on someone else. There was the sound of a blow, and a yelp of pain.

“Dog!” swore de Valence. “Did you not give the signal that Étienne Villiers was riding this way?”

“ ’Tis not my fault!” howled the wretch, a peasant by his accent. “I knew him not. The taverner of the Knave’s Fingers bade me watch for a man riding with a red-haired wench in a man’s garb, and when I saw her riding by with the soldier, I thought he must be this Étienne Villiers – ahhh – mercy!”

There was a report, a shriek and the sound of a falling body.

“We will hang for this, if the Duke learns of it,” said the captain. “Guiscard was high in the favor of the Vicomte de Lautrec, governor of Milan. D’Alençon will hang us to conciliate the Vicomte. We must guard our own necks. We will hide the bodies in the stream, and none will be the wiser. Scatter now, and look for the corpse of the girl. If she still lives, we must close her mouth forever.”

At that, I began to edge my way backwards, towards the stream. Glancing across, I saw that the opposite bank was low and level, grown

with bushes, and walled by the cliffs I have mentioned, in which I saw what looked like the mouth of a ravine. That seemed to offer a way of retreat. Crawling until I came nearly to the water's edge, I rose and ran lightly toward the stream, which glided over a rocky bed scarcely knee-deep there. The bravos had spread out in a sort of crescent, beating the bushes. I heard them behind me, and, further away, on either side of me. And suddenly one gave tongue like a hound who sights the prey.

"There she goes! Halt, damn you!"

A matchlock cracked and the bullet whined past my ear, but I ran fleetly on. They came crashing and roaring through the bushes after me – a dozen men in morions and cuirasses, with swords in their hands.

One broke cover on the very edge of the stream, as I was splashing across, and fearing a thrust in the back, I turned and met him in mid-stream. He came on, splashing like a bull, a great, whiskered, roaring swashbuckler, sword in hand.

We fell to it, thrusting, slashing and parrying, in water knee-deep, and I was at a disadvantage, for the swirling stream hindered my foot-work. His sword beat down on my helmet, making sparks glint before my eyes, and seeing the others closing in, I cast all on a desperate attack, and drove my sword so fiercely through his teeth that the point transfixed his skull and rang on the lining of his morion.

I wrenched my blade free as he sank down, crimsoning the stream, and even at that instant a pistol ball struck me in the thigh. I staggered, then recovered myself and limped swiftly out of the water and across the shore. The bravos were thrashing across the stream, bawling threats and waving their swords. Some loosed pistols at me, but their aim was vile, and I reached the cliff, dragging my injured leg. My boot was full of blood, and the whole limb numbed.

I plunged through the bushes at the mouth of the ravine – then halted with icy despair gripping my heart. I was in a trap. It was no ravine into which I had come, but merely a wide cleft in the rock of the cliff, which ran back a few yards and then narrowed to a crack. It formed a sharp triangle, the walls of which were too high and sheer to be climbed, wounded leg or no.

The bravos realized my plight, and came on with shouts of triumph. Dropping on my uninjured knee, behind the bushes at the cleft's mouth, I drew pistol and shot the foremost ruffian through the head. That halted their

rush and sent them scattering for cover. Those on the other side of the stream ducked back into the trees, while those who had gained this side spread out among the bushes near the bank.

I reloaded my pistol and lay close, while they bawled to one another, and began loosing at my covert with matchlocks. But the heavy balls whined high overhead or spattered futilely on the rocky walls, and presently, noting a black-whiskered rogue squirming across an open space toward a bush nearer my retreat, I put a ball through his body, whereat the others yelled blood-thirstily and renewed their fire. But the range was too far for those across the stream to do good shooting, and the others were shooting from difficult angles, not daring to show any part of themselves.

Presently one shouted: “Why do not some of you bastards go down stream and find a place to climb the cliff, and so come at the wench from above?”

“Because we could not injure her without showing ourselves,” answered de Valence from his covert, “and she shoots like the devil himself. Wait! Night will soon fall, and in the darkness she can not aim. She can not escape. When it is too dusky for good shooting, we’ll rush her and finish this matter with the steel. The bitch is wounded, I know. Bide your time!”

I chanced a long shot at the bushes whence de Valence’s voice issued, and from the burst of scorching profanity evoked thereby, do guess that my

lead came too close for comfort.

Then followed a period of waiting, punctuated now and then by a shot from the trees. My injured leg throbbed, and flies gathered in a cloud about me. The sun, which had at first beat down fiercely into the crevice, withdrew, leaving me in deep shade, for which I was thankful. But hunger bit me, until my thirst grew so fierce that it drove hunger from mind. The sight and rippling noise of the stream nigh maddened. And the ball in my thigh burned so intolerably that I made shift to cut it out with my dagger, and then stanched the bleeding by cramming crumpled leaves into the wound.

I saw no way out; it seemed I must die there, perish all my dreams of pageantry and glory and the bright splendor of adventure. The dim drums whose beat I had sought to follow seemed fading and receding, like a distant knell, leaving only the dying ashes of death and oblivion.

But when I searched my soul for fear I found it not, nor regret nor any sorrow. Better to die there than live and grow old as the women I had known had grown old. I thought of Guiscard de Clisson, lying beside his dead horse, with his head in a pool of blood, and knew regret that death had come to him in such a sorry way, and that he had not died as he would have wished, on a field of battle, with the banner of his king flowing above him, and the blast of the trumpets in his ears.

The slow hours dragged on. Once I thought I heard a horse galloping, but the sound faded and ceased. I shifted my numb body and cursed the gnats, wishing mine enemies would charge while there was yet enough light for shooting.

Then, even as I heard them begin to shout to each other in the gathering dusk, a voice above and behind me brought me about, pistols raised, thinking they had climbed the cliff after all.

“Agnès!” The voice was low and urgent. “Hold your fire! It is I, Étienne!” The bushes were thrust aside, and a pale face looked over the brink of the cleft.

“Back, fool!” I exclaimed. “They’ll shoot you like a pigeon!”

“They can not see me from where they hide,” he answered. “Speak softly, girl. Look, I lower this rope. It is knotted. Can you climb? I can never haul you up, with but one good arm.”

Quick hope fired my nerves.

“Aye!” I hissed. “Let it down swiftly, and make the end fast. I hear them splashing across the stream.”

Quickly then, in the gathering darkness, a snaky length came sliding down the cliff, and I laid hands upon it. Crooking a knee about it, I dragged myself up hand over hand, and sinew-stretching work it was, for the lower end of the rope dangled free, and I turned like a pendulum. Then, the whole task must be done by my hands alone, for my injured leg was stiff as a sword sheath, and anyway, my Spanish boots were not made for rope-climbing.

But I accomplished it, and I dragged myself over the lip of the cliff just as the cautious scrape of leather on sand and the clink of steel told me that the bravos were gathering close to the crevice mouth for the rush.

Étienne swiftly gathered up the rope, and motioning to me, led the way through the bushes, talking in a hurried, nervous undertone. “I heard the shooting as I came along the road; left my horse tied in the forest and stole forward on foot to see what was forward. I saw Guiscard lying dead in the road, and understood from the shouts of the bravos that you were at bay. I know this place from of old. I stole back to my horse, rode along the stream until I found a place where I could ride up on the cliffs through a ravine. The rope I made of my cloak, torn to strips and spliced with my girdle and bridle-reins. Hark!”

Behind and below us broke out a mad clamor of yells and oaths.

“D’Alençon yearns indeed for my head,” muttered Étienne. “I heard the bravos’ talk while I crouched among the trees. Every road within leagues of Alençon is being patrolled by such bands as these, since that dog of an innkeeper divulged to the Duke that I was again in this part of the kingdom.

“And now you will be hunted as desperately. I know Renault de Valence, captain of those rogues. So long as he lives, your life will not be safe, for he will endeavor to destroy all proof that it was his knaves who slew Guiscard de Clisson. Here is my horse. We must not tarry.”

“But why did you follow me?” I asked.

He turned and faced me, a pale-faced shadow in the dusk.

“You were wrong when you said no debt lay between us,” quoth he. “I owe you my life. It was for me that you fought and slew Tristan Pelligny and his thieves. Why cling to your old hatred of me? You have well avenged a plotted wrong. You accepted Guiscard de Clisson as comrade. Will you not let me ride to the wars with you?”

“As comrade, no more,” I said. “Remember, I am woman no longer.”

“As brothers-in-arms,” he agreed.

I thrust forth my hand, and he his, and our fingers locked briefly.

“Once more we must ride both on the same horse,” he laughed, with a gay lilt of his old-time spirit. “Let us begone before those dogs find their way up here. D’Alençon has blocked the roads to Chartres, to Paris and to Orléans, but the world is ours! I think there are brave times ahead of us, adventures and wars and plunder! Then hey for Italy, and all brave adventurers!”

Blades for France

I
When I Met Men Wearing Masks

“Stripling, what do you with a sword? Ha, by Saint Denis, it’s a woman! A woman with sword and helmet!”

And the great black-whiskered rogue halted with hand on hilt and gaped at me in amaze.

I gave back his stare no whit abashed. A woman, yes, and it was a lonely place, a shadowed forest glade far from human habitation. But I did not wear doublet, trunk-hose and Spanish boots merely to show off my figure, and the morion perched on my red locks and the sword that hung at my hip were not ornaments.

I looked at this fellow whom chance had caused me to meet in the forest, and I liked him little. He was big enough, with an evil, scarred face; his morion was chased with gold, and under his cloak glimmered breastplate and gussets. This cloak was a notable garment, of Ciprus velvet, cunningly worked with gold thread. Apparently the owner had been napping under a huge tree nearby. A great horse stood there, tied to a branch, with rich housings of red leather and gilt braid. At the sight I sighed, for I had walked far since dawn, and my feet in my long boots ached.

“A woman!” repeated this rogue wonderingly. “And clad like a man! Throw off that tattered cloak, wench; I’d have a better sight of thee! Zounds, but you are a fine, tall, supple hussy! Come, doff your cloak!”

“Dog, have done!” I admonished harshly. “I’m no whimpering doxy for your sport.”

“Who, then?” he ogled.

“Agnès de la Fère,” I answered. “If you were not a stranger here, you’d know of me.”

He shook his head. “Nay, I’m new come in these parts. I hail from Chalons, I. But no matter. One name’s as good as another. Come hither, Agnès, and give me a kiss.”

“Fool!” My ever ready anger was beginning to smolder. “Must I slay half the men in France to teach them respect? Look ye! I wear these garments but as the garb and tools of my trade, not to catch the attention of men. I drink, fight and live like a man – ”

“But shalt love like a woman!” quoth he, and lunging suddenly at me like a great bear, he sought to drag me into his embrace, but reeled back from a buffet that split his lip and brought a stream of blood down his black beard.

“Bitch!” he roared in swift fury, his eyes blazing. “I’ll cripple you for that!” He made at me again with his great hands clutching, but as I wrenched out my sword, suddenly he seemed sobered by what he saw in my eyes, and, as if he realized at last that this was no play, he gave back and drew his own blade, casting off his cloak.

Our blades met with a clash that woke the echoes through the forest, and I came near killing him at the first pass. It was mainly by chance that he partially parried my fierce thrust, and as it was my point ploughed along his jaw-bone, so the blood gushed over his gorget. He yelled like a mad dog, but the wound steadied him, and made him realize that it was no child’s task he had before him.

He wielded his blade with all his strength and craft, and no mean swordsman I found him. Well for me that I had learned the art from the finest blade in France, for this black-bearded rogue was mighty and cunning, and full of foul tricks and murderous subterfuges, whereby I knew he was no honest man, but a bravo, one of those hired killers who sell their swords to any who can pay their wage.

But I was no child at the game, and my quickness of eye and hand and foot was such as no man could match. Failing in all his tricks and strategy, Black-beard sought to beat me down by sheer strength, raining thunderous blows on my guard with all his power. But this availed him no better, because, woman though I was, I was all steel springs and whale-bone, and had the art of turning his strokes before they were well begun, and thus avoiding their full fury. Presently his breath began to whistle through his bared teeth, and foam to mingle with the blood on his whiskers, and his belly to heave beneath his cuirass.

Then as his strength and fury began to fail, I attacked relentlessly, and beating down his weakening guard, drove my point into the midst of his black beard, above his gorget, severing jugular, windpipe and spine at one thrust, so he gasped out his life even as he fell.

Cleansing my blade, I meditated upon my next action, and presently emptied out his pouch, finding a few silver coins therein, and I was disappointed at the poorness thereof, for I was without money, and hungry. Still, they would suffice for a supper at some woodland inn. Then, seeing

that my cloak was, as he had said, worn and ragged, I took his, which I much admired because of the curious quality of the gold thread which decorated it. When I lifted it a mask of black silk fell out of it, and I thought to leave it where it fell, but thought better of it, and thrust it under my girdle. I wrapped the body in my old cloak and dragged it into the bushes, where it would not be seen by any chance passer-by, and mounting the horse, rode on in the direction I had been travelling, and very grateful for the easing of my weary feet.

As I pushed on through the gathering dusk, I fell to brooding on the events which had befallen me since I, as an ignorant country girl, had knifed the man my father was forcing me to marry, and had fled the village of la Fère, to become a sword-woman, and a swashbuckler in breeches.

Truly, violence and death seemed to dog my trail. Guiscard de Clisson, who taught me the art of the sword, and with whom I was riding to the wars in Italy, had been shot down from ambush by bravos hired by le duc d'Alençon, thinking him to be my friend Étienne Villiers. Étienne had knowledge of intrigue against King François on the part of the Duke, and for that knowledge his life was forfeit. Now I too was being hunted by Renault de Valence, the leader of those bravos, since they thought me to be the only one besides themselves who knew the true facts of de Clisson's murder.

For de Valence knew that if it were known that he and his bravos had slain de Clisson, the famous general of the mercenaries, d'Alençon would hang them all to pacify de Clisson's friends. Guiscard's body was rotting in the river where the bravos had thrown it, and now de Valence was hunting me on his own account, even while he hunted Étienne for the Duke.

Villiers and I had run and hidden and dodged like rats from the dogs, desirous of getting into Italy, but so far being penned in that corner of the world through fear of our enemies, who combed the kingdom for us. Even now I was on my way to a rendezvous with Étienne, who had gone stealthily to the coast, there to find, if he could, a certain pirate named Roger Hawksly, an Englishman, who harried the shores, for to such extremities were we forced that it was imperative that we get out of the country, however we could, since it was certain that we could not forever avoid the bloodhounds on our trail. I was to meet my companion at midnight, at a certain spot on the road that meandered down to the coast.

But as I rode through the twilight, I found no regret in my heart that I had traded my life of drudgery for one of wandering and violence. It was the life for which mysterious Fate had intended me, and I fitted it as well as any man: drinking, brawling, gambling, and fighting. With pistol, dagger or sword I had proved my prowess again and again, and I feared no man who walked the earth. Better a short life of adventure and wild living than a long dreary grind of soul-crushing household toil and child-bearing, cringing under the cudgel of a man I hated.

So I meditated as I came upon a small tavern set beside the forest road, the light of which set my empty belly to quivering anew. I approached warily, but saw none within the common room except the tap-boy and a serving wench, so gave my horse into the care of a stable-boy, and strode into the tavern.

The tap-boy gaped as he brought me a tankard of wine, and the wench stared until her eyes were like to pop out of her head, but I was used to such looks, and I merely bade her bring me food, and sat me down at the board, with my cloak about my shoulders, and my morion still on my head – for it served me well to be alert and full-armed at all times.

Now as I ate, I seemed to hear doors opening and closing stealthily in the back part of the tavern, and a low mumble of voices came to my ears. What this portended I knew not, but I was minded to finish my meal, and feigned to give no heed when the innkeeper, a silent, swarthy man in a leathern apron, came from some inner chamber, stared fixedly at me, and then departed again into the hinterlands of the tavern.

It was not long after his disappearance when another man entered the tavern from a side door – a small, hard-figured man with dark sharp features, somberly dressed, and wrapped in a black silk cloak. I felt his eyes upon me, but did not appear to regard him, except that I stealthily loosed my sword in its scabbard. He came hurriedly toward me, and hissed: “La Balafre!”

As he was obviously speaking to me, I turned, my hand on my hilt, and he gave back, his breath hissing through his teeth. So for an instant we faced each other. Then:

“Saint Denis! A woman! La Balafre, a *woman!* They did not tell me – I did not know – ”

“Well?” I demanded warily, not understanding his bewilderment, but in no mind to let him know it.

“Well, it’s no matter,” he said at last. “You are not the first woman to wear breeches and a sword. Little matter what sort of a finger pulls the trigger, the ball speeds to the mark. Your master bade me watch for your cloak – it was by the gold thread that I recognized you. Come, come, it grows late. They await you in the secret room.”

Now I realized that this man had mistaken me for the bravo I had slain; doubtless the fellow had been on his way to a tryst for some crime. I knew not what to say. If I denied that I was la Balafre, it was not likely that his friends would allow me to go in peace without explaining how I came by his cloak. I saw no way out except to strike down the dark-faced man, and ride for my life. But with his next words, the whole situation changed.

“Put on your mask and wrap well your cloak about you.” he said. “None knows you here but I, and I only because that cloak was described to me. It was foolish of you to sit here openly in the tavern where any man might have seen you. The task we have to do is of such nature that all our identities must be hidden, not only tonight but henceforward. You know me only as Jehan. You will know none of the others, or they you.”

Now at these words a mad whim seized me, born of recklessness and womanish curiosity. Saying naught, I rose, put on the mask I had found on the body of the real la Balafre, wrapped my cloak about me so that none could have known me for a woman, and followed the man who called himself Jehan.

He led the way through a door at the back of the room, which he closed and bolted behind us, and drawing forth a black mask similar to mine, he donned it. Then, taking a candle from a table, he led on down a narrow corridor with heavy oaken panels. At last he halted, extinguished the candle, and rapped cautiously on the wall. There was a fumbling on the other side, and a dim light glimmered through as a false panel was slid aside. Motioning me to follow him, Jehan glided through the opening, and after I had entered, closed it behind us.

I found myself in a small chamber, without visible doors or windows, though there must have been some subtle system of ventilation. A hooded lanthorn lit the room with a vague and ghostly light. Nine figures huddled against the walls on settles – nine figures wrapped closely in dark cloaks, feathered hats or black morions pulled low to meet the black masks which hid their faces. Only their eyes burned through the holes in the masks. None moved nor spake. It was like a conclave of the damned.

Jehan did not speak, but motioned me to take my place on a settle, and then he glided across the chamber and drew back another panel. Through this opening stalked another figure, masked and cloaked like the rest, but with a subtly different bearing. He strode like a man accustomed to command, and even in his disguise, there was something faintly familiar to me about him.

He stalked to the center of the small chamber, and Jehan motioned toward us on the settles, as if to say that all was in readiness. The tall stranger nodded and said: “You received your instructions before you came here. You know, all of you, that you have but to follow me, and obey my commands. Ask no questions; you are being well paid; that is sufficient for you to know. Speak as little as possible. You do not know me, and I do not know you. The less each man knows of his mates, the better for all. As soon as our task is completed, we scatter, each man for himself. Is that understood?”

Ten hooded heads wagged grimly in the lanthorn light. But I drew back on my settle, gathering my cloak more closely about me; he was understood better than he knew. I had heard that voice, under circumstances I was not likely to forget; it was the voice that had shouted commands to the murderers of Guiscard de Clisson, as I lay wounded in a cleft of the cliff and fought them off with my pistols. The man who commanded these villains amongst whom I had fallen was Renault de Valence, the man who sought my life.

As his steely eyes, burning from his mask, swept over us, I unconsciously tensed myself, gripping my hilt beneath the cloak. But he could not recognize me in my disguise, were he Satan himself.

Motioning to Jehan, mine enemy arose and made toward the panel through which he had entered. Jehan beckoned us, and we followed de Valence through the opening single file, a train of silent black ghosts. Behind us Jehan extinguished the lanthorn, and followed us. We groped our way through utter darkness for a short space, then a door swung open, and the broad shoulders of our leader were framed for an instant against the stars. We came out into a small courtyard behind the inn, where twelve horses champed restlessly and pawed the ground. Mine was among them, though I had told the servant to stable him. Evidently everyone in the tavern of the Half Moon had his orders.

Without a word we mounted and followed de Valence across the court, and out into a path which led through the forest. We rode in silence, save for the clop of the hoofs on the hard soil, and the occasional creak of leather or clank of harness. We were headed westward, toward the coast, and presently the forest thinned to brush and scattered trees, and the path dwindled and vanished in a bushy maze. Here we rode no longer single file, but in a ragged clump. And I believed my opportunity had come. Whither we were riding I knew not, nor greatly cared. It must be some work of le duc d'Alençon, since his right-hand man de Valence was in command. But I did know that as long as de Valence lived, neither my life nor the life of Étienne Villiers was worth a piece of broken copper.

It was dark; the moon had not yet risen, and the stars were hidden by rolling masses of clouds, which, though neither stormy nor very black, yet blotted out the light of the heavens in their ceaseless surging from horizon to horizon. We were not following any road, but riding through the wilderness. A night wind moaned through the trees, as I edged my horse closer and closer to that of Renault de Valence, gripping my poniard beneath my cloak.

Now I was drawing up beside him, and heard him mutter to Jehan who rode knee to knee with him, "He was a fool to flout her, when she could have made him greater than the king of France. If Roger Hawksly – "

Rising in my stirrups I drove my poniard between his shoulders with all the strength of sinews nerved to desperate work. The breath went out of him in a gasp, and he pitched headlong from the saddle, and in that instant I wrenched my horse about and struck the spurs deep.

With a desperate heave and plunge he tore headlong through the shapes that hemmed us in, knocking steeds and riders aside, plunged through the bushes and was gone while they groped for their blades.

Behind me I heard startled oaths and yells, and the clank of steel, Jehan's voice yelling curses, and de Valence's, choking and gasping, croaking orders. I cursed my luck. Even with the impact of the blow, I had known I had failed. De Valence wore a shirt of chain mail under his doublet, even as I did. The poniard had bent almost double on it, without wounding him. It was only the terrific force of the blow which had knocked him, half stunned, from his steed. And knowing the man as I did, I knew that it was very likely he would quickly be upon my trail, unless his other business be too urgent to permit it – and urgent indeed would be the business that would

interfere with de Valence's private vengeance. Besides, if Jehan told him that "la Balafre" was a red-headed girl, he would be sure to recognize his old enemy, Agnès de Chastillon.

So I gave the horse the rein and rode at a reckless gallop over bushy expanses and through scattered woodlands, expecting each moment to hear the drum of hoofs behind me. I rode southward, toward the road where I was to meet Étienne Villiers, and came upon it more suddenly that I expected. The road ran westward to the coast, and we had been paralleling its course.

Perhaps a mile to the west stood a roadside cross of stone, where the road split, one branch running west and the other southwest, and it was there that I was to meet Étienne Villiers. It lacked some hours till midnight, and I was not minded to wait in open view until he came, lest de Valence come first. So when I came to the cross, I took refuge among the trees, which grew there in a dense clump, and set myself to wait for my companion.

The night was still, and I heard no sounds of pursuit; I hoped that if the bravos had pursued me, they had lost me in the darkness, which had been easy enough to do.

I tied my horse back among the trees, and hardly had I squatted among the shadows at the roadside when I heard the drumming of hoofs. But this noise came from the southwest, and was but a single horse. I crouched there, sword in hand, as the drumming grew louder and nearer, and presently the rising moon, peeping through the rolling clouds, disclosed a horseman galloping along the white road, his cloak billowing out behind him. And I recognized the lithe figure and feathered cap of Étienne Villiers.

II
How a King's Mistress Knelt to Me

He pulled up at the cross, and swore beneath his breath, speaking softly aloud to himself, as was his custom: "Too early, by hours; well, I'll await her here."

"You'll not have long to wait," said I, stepping from the shadows.

He wheeled in his saddle, pistol in hand, then laughed and swung down to earth.

"By Saint Denis, Agnès," said he, "I should never be surprized to find you anywhere, at any time. What, a horse? And no crow-bait, either! And a fine new cloak! By Satan, comrade, you have had luck – was it dice or the sword?"

"The sword," I answered.

"But why are you here so early?" he asked. "What portends this?"

"That Renault de Valence is not far from us," I answered, and heard his breath hiss between his teeth, saw his hand lock again on his pistol butt. So quickly I told him what had passed, and he shook his head.

"The Devil takes care of his own," he muttered. "Renault is hard to kill. But listen, I have a strange tale to tell, and until it is told, this is as good a place as another. Here we can watch and listen, and death cannot steal upon us behind closed doors and through secret corridors. And when my tale is told, we must take counsel as to our next move, because we can no longer count on Roger Hawksly.

"Listen: last night, just at moonrise, I approached the small isolated bay in which I knew the Englishman lay at anchor. We rogues have ways of learning secrets, as you know, Agnès. The coast thereabouts is rugged, with cliffs and headlands and inlets. The bay in question is surrounded by trees which grow down rugged slopes to the very edge of the water. I crept through them, and saw his ship, *The Resolute Friend*, lying at anchor, true enough, and all on board her apparently in drunken sleep. These pirates be fools, especially the English, who keep vile watch. I could see men stretched on the deck, with broken casks near them, and judged that those who were supposed to keep watch, had drunken themselves into helplessness.

“Now as I meditated whether to hail them, or to swim out to the ship, I heard the sound of muffled oars, and saw three longboats round the headland and sweep down on the silent ship. The boats were packed with men, and I saw the glint of steel in the moon. All unseen by the sleeping pirates, they drew up alongside, and I knew not whether to shout or be still, for I thought it might be Roger and his men returning from some raid.

“In the moonlight I saw them swarming up the chains – Englishmen, beyond doubt, dressed in the garb of common sailors. Then as I watched, one of the drunkards on deck stirred in his sleep, gaped, and then suddenly

scrambled up, screaming a warning. Up out of the hold and out of the cabin rushed Roger Hawksly and his men, in their shirts, half asleep, grasping their weapons in bewilderment, and over the rail swarmed these newcomers, who fell on the pirates sword in hand.

"It was a massacre rather than a fight. The pirates, half asleep and evidently half drunk as well, were cut down, almost to a man. I saw their bodies hurled overboard. Some few leaped into the water and swam ashore, but most died.

"Then the victors hauled up the anchor, and some of them returning into the boats, towed *The Resolute Friend* out of the inlet, and watching from where I lay, I presently saw her spread her sails and stand out to sea. Presently another ship rounded the headland and followed her.

"Of the survivors of the pirate crew I know nothing, for they fled into the woods and vanished. But Roger Hawksly is no longer master of a ship, and whether he lives or died, I know not, but we must find another man who will take us to Italy.

"But herein is a mystery: some of the Englishmen who took *The Resolute Friend* were but rough seamen. But others were not. I understand English; I know a high-born voice when I hear it, and tarry breeches cannot always conceal rank from a sharp eye. The moon was bright as day. Agnès, those seamen were led by noblemen disguised in mean apparel."

"Why?" I wondered.

"Aye, why! 'Tis easy to see how the trick was done. They sailed up to the headland, where they anchored, out of sight from the inlet, and sent men in boats to take their prey. But why take such a desperate chance? Luck was on their side, else Hawksly and his sea-wolves had been sober and alert, and had blown them out of the water as they came on. There is but one solution: secrecy. That likewise explains the noblemen in seamen's shirts and breeks. For some reason someone wished to destroy the pirates swiftly, silently, and secretly. As to the reason for that, I do not know, since Hawksly was a man hated equally by the French and the English."

"Why, as to that – *hark!*"

Down the road, from the east, sounded the pound of racing hoofs. Clouds had rolled again over the moon, and it was dark as Erebus.

"De Valence!" I hissed. "He is following me – and alone. Give me a pistol! He will not escape this time!"

“We had best be sure he is alone,” expostulated Étienne as he handed me a pistol.

“He’s alone,” I snarled. “ ’Tis but one rider – but if the Devil himself rode with him – *ha!*”

A flying shape loomed out of the night; at that instant a single moonbeam cut through the clouds and faintly illumined the racing horse and its rider. And I fired pointblank.

The great horse reared and plunged headlong, and a piteous cry cut the night. It was echoed by Étienne. He had seen, as had I, in the flash of the shot, a woman clinging to the reins of the flying steed.

We ran forward, seeing a slender figure stirring on the ground beside the steed – a figure which knelt and lifted helpless arms, whimpering in fright.

“Are you hurt?” gasped Étienne. “My God, Agnès, you’ve killed a woman – ”

“I struck the horse,” I answered. “He threw up his head just as I fired. Here, let me see to her!”

Bending over her, I lifted her face, a pallid oval in the darkness. Under my hard fingers her garments and flesh felt soft and wondrous fine.

“Are you hurt badly, wench?” I demanded.

But at the sound of my voice she gave a gasping cry and threw her arms about my knees.

“Oh, you too are a woman! Have mercy! Do not hurt me! Please – ”

“Cease these whimperings, wench,” I ordered impatiently. “Here is naught to hurt you. Are your bones broken by reason of the fall?”

“Nay, I am only bruised and shaken. But oh, my poor horse – ”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. “I do not slay animals willingly. I was aiming at his rider.”

“But why should you murder me?” she wailed. “I know you not – ”

“I am Agnès de Chastillon,” I answered, “whom some men call Dark Agnès de la Fère. Who are you?”

I had lifted her to her feet and released her, and now as she stood before us, the moon broke suddenly through the clouds and flooded the road with silvery light. I looked in amaze at the richness of our captive’s garments, and the beauty of her oval face, framed in a glory of hair that was like dark foam; her dark eyes glowed like black jewels in the moonlight. And from Étienne came a strangled cry.

“My lady!” He doffed his feathered cap, and dropped to his knee. “Kneel, Agnès, kneel, girl! It is Françoise de Foix!”

“Why should an honest woman kneel to a royal strumpet?” I demanded, thrusting my thumbs into my girdle and bracing my legs wide as I faced her.

Étienne was stricken dumb, and the girl seemed to wince at my peasant candor.

“Rise, I beg of you,” she said humbly to Étienne, and he did so, cap in hand.

“But this was most unwise, my lady!” said he. “To have come alone and at night – ”

“Oh,” she cried suddenly, catching at her temples, as if reminded of her mission. “Even now they may be slaying him! Oh, sir, if you be a man, aid me!”

She seized Étienne by the doublet and shook him in the agony of her insistence.

“Listen,” she begged, though Étienne was listening with all his ears. “I came here tonight, alone, as you see, to endeavor to right a wrong, and to save a life.

“You know me as Françoise de Foix, the mistress of the king – ”

“I have seen you at court, where I was not always a stranger,” said Étienne, speaking with a strange difficulty. “I know you for the most beautiful woman in all France.”

“I thank you, my friend,” she said, still clinging to him. “But the world sees little of what goes on behind the palace doors. Men say I twist the king about my finger, God help me – but I swear I am but a pawn in a game I do not understand – the slave of a greater will than that of François.”

“Louise de Savoie,” muttered Étienne.

“Aye, who through me, rules her son, and through him, all France. It was she who made me what I am. Else I had been, not the mistress of a king, but the honest wife of some honest man.

“Listen, my friend, oh listen and believe me! Tonight a man is riding toward the coast, and death! And the letter which lured him there was written by me! Oh, I am a hateful thing, to thus serve one who – who loves me –

“But I am not my own mistress. I am the slave of Louise de Savoie. What she bids me do, that I do, or else I smart for it. She dominates me and I dare not resist her. This – this man was in Alençon, when he received the letter begging him to meet me at a certain tavern near the coast. Only for me would he have gone, for he well knows of his powerful enemies. But me he trusts – oh God pity me!”

She sobbed hysterically for an instant, while I watched in wonder, for I could never weep, my whole life.

“It is a plot of Louise,” she said. “Once she loved this man, but he scorned her, and she plots his ruin. Already she has shorn him of titles and honor; now she would rob him of life itself.

“At the tavern of the Hawk he will be met, not by my miserable self, but by a band of hired bravos, who will slay his servants and take him captive and deliver him to the pirate Roger Hawksly, who has been paid well to dispose of him forever.”

“Why so much planning and elaborate work?” I demanded. “Surely a dagger in the back would do the job as well.”

“Not even Louise dares discovery,” she answered. “The – the man is too powerful – ”

“There is only one man in France whom Louise hates so fiercely,” said Étienne, looking full into Françoise’s eyes. She bowed her head, then lifted it and returned the look with her lustrous dark eyes.

“Aye!” she said simply.

“A blow to France,” muttered Étienne, “if *he* should fall – but my lady, Roger Hawksly will not be there to receive him.” And he swiftly related

what he had seen on the coast.

“Then the bravos will slay him themselves,” she said with a shudder. “They will never dare let him go. They are led by Jehan, the right hand man of Louise – ”

“And by Renault de Valence,” muttered Étienne. “I see it all now; you were with that band, Agnès. I wonder if d’Alençon knows of the plot.”

“No,” answered Françoise. “But Louise plans to raise him to the rank of her victim; so she uses his most trusted man, Renault de Valence, for her schemes. But oh, we waste time! Please will you not aid him? Ride with me to the tavern of the Hawk. Perchance we may rescue him – may reach him in time to get him away before they arrive. I stole away, and have ridden all night at top speed – please, please aid me!”

“Françoise de Foix has never to ask twice of Étienne Villiers,” said Étienne, in that strange unnatural voice, standing in the moonlight, cap in hand. Perhaps it was the moon, but a strange expression was on his face, softening the lines of cynicism and wild living, and making him seem another and nobler man.

“And you, mademoiselle!” The court beauty turned to me, with her arms outstretched. “You would not kneel to me, Dark Agnès; look, I kneel to you!”

And so she did – down in the dust on her knees, her white hands clasped and her dark eyes sparkling with tears.

“Get up, girl,” I said awkwardly, ashamed for some obscure reason. “Kneel not to me. I’ll do all I can. I know nothing of court intrigues and what you have said buzzes in my skull until I am dizzy, but what we can do, that we will do!”

With a sob she rose and threw both her soft arms about my neck and kissed me on the lips, so I was further ashamed. It was the first time I remembered anyone ever kissing me.

“Come,” I said roughly. “We waste time.”

Étienne lifted the girl into his saddle and swung up behind her, and I mounted the great black horse.

“What do you plan?” he asked me.

“I have no plan. We must be guided by the circumstances which confront us. Let us ride as swiftly as may be for the inn of the Hawk. If Renault wasted much time in looking for me – as doubtless he did – he and his

bravos may not yet have reached the tavern. If they have – well, we are but two swords, but we can but do our best."

And so I fell to recharging the pistol I had taken from Étienne, and a tedious task it was, in the darkness, and riding hard. So what speech passed between Étienne and Françoise de Foix I know not, but the murmur of their voices reached me from time to time, and in his voice was an unfamiliar softness – strange in a rogue like Étienne Villiers.

So we came at last upon the tavern of the Hawk, which loomed stark against the night, dark save for a single lanthorn in the common room. Silence reigned utterly, and there was the scent of fresh-spilled blood –

In the road before the tavern lay a man in the livery of a lackey, his white staring face turned to the stars, and dabbled with blood. Near the door lay a shape in a black cloak, and the fragments of a black mask, soaked in blood, lay beside it, with a feathered hat. But the features of the man were but a ghastly mask of hacked and slashed flesh, unrecognizable.

Just inside the door lay another lackey, his brains oozing from his crushed head, a broken sword still gripped in his hand. Inside the tavern was a waste of broken settles and smashed tables, with great gouts of blood fouling the floor. A third lackey lay huddled in the corner, his blood-stained doublet showing a dozen sword-thrusts. Over all hung silence like a pall.

Françoise had fallen with a moan when she saw the horror of it all, and now Étienne half led, half carried her in his arms.

"Renault and his cutthroats were here," he said. "They have taken their prey and gone. But where? All the servants would have fled in terror, not to return until daylight."

But peering here and there, sword in hand, I saw something huddled under an over-turned settle, and dragging it forth, disclosed a terrified serving wench who fell on her knees and bawled for mercy.

"Have done, jade," I said impatiently. "Here is none to harm you. But say quickly what has occurred."

"The men in masks," she whimpered. "They came suddenly in at the door – "

"Did you not hear their horses?" demanded Étienne.

"Would Renault warn his victim?" I asked impatiently. "Doubtless they left their steeds a short distance away and came softly on foot. Go on, girl."

"They fell on the gentleman and his servants," she blubbered. "The gentleman who had arrived earlier this night and who sat silently at his

wine, and seemed in doubt and meditation. As the masked men entered he sprang up and cried out that he was betrayed – ”

“Oh!” It was a cry of agony from Françoise de Foix. She clasped her hands and writhed as in agony.

“Then there was fighting and slaying and death,” wailed the wench. “They slew the gentleman’s servants, and him they bound and dragged away – ”

“Was it he who so disfigured the bravo who lies outside the door?” I demanded.

“Nay, he slew him with a pistol ball. The leader of the masks, the tall man who wore a chain-mail shirt under his doublet – he hacked the dead man’s face with his sword – ”

“Aye,” I muttered. “De Valence would not wish to leave him to be identified.”

“And this same man, before he left, passed his sword through each of the dying lackeys to make sure they were dead,” she sobbed in terror. “I hid under the settle and watched, for I was too frightened to run, as did the innkeeper and the other servants.”

“In which direction did they go?” I demanded, shaking the wretched girl in my intensity.

“That – that way!” she gasped, pointing. “Down the old road to the coast.”

“Did you overhear anything that might give a clue as to their destination?”

“No – no – they spoke little, and I so frightened.”

“Hoofs of the devil, girl!” I exclaimed in a fury. “Such work is never done in silence. Think hard – remember something they said, before I turn you across my knee.”

“All I remember,” she gasped, “is that the tall leader said to the poor gentleman, once they had him bound – doffing his helmet in a sweeping bow – ‘My lord,’ quoth he mockingly, ‘your ship awaits you!’ ”

“Sure they would put him aboard ship,” exclaimed Étienne. “And the nearest place a ship would put in is Corsair Cove! Come! They cannot be far ahead of us. If they followed the old road – as they would be likely to do, not knowing the country as I do – it will take them half an hour longer to reach the cove than it will take us, following a short cut of which I know.”

“Come then!” cried Françoise, revived anew by the hope of action. And a few moments later, we were riding through the shadows for the coast. We followed a dim path, its mouth hidden by dense bushes, which wound along a rocky ridge, descending seaward amid boulders and gnarled trees.

So we came into a cove, surrounded by rugged slopes, thickly treed, and through the trees we saw the glimmer of water, and the shimmer of the furtive moon on broad sails. And leaving our horses, and Françoise with them, we crept forward, Étienne and I, and presently looked out upon an open beach, lighted by the moon which at the time shone out through the curling clouds.

Under the shadow of the trees stood a group of black and sombre figures, and out of a boat, just drawn up on the beach (we could still see the foam floating on the water that had swirled in her wake) trooped a score of men in seamen’s garb. Out in the deeper water rode a ship, the moonlight glinting on her gilt-work and spreading courses, and Étienne swore softly.

“That’s *The Resolute Friend*, but those are not her crew. *They* are food for the fishes. These are the men who took her. What devil’s game is this?”

We saw a man pushed forward by the masked bravos – a man tall and well-formed, who, even in torn shirt and blood-stained, with his arms bound behind him, had the bearing of a leader among men.

“Saint Denis,” breathed Étienne. “It is he, right enough.”

“Who?” I demanded. “Who is this fellow we must risk our lives to rescue?”

“Charles,” he began, then broke off: “Listen!”

We had wriggled nearer, and Renault de Valence's voice came plainly to us.

"Nay, that was not in the bargain. I know you not. Let Roger Hawksly, your captain, come ashore. I wish to be sure he knows his instructions."

"Captain Hawksly cannot be disturbed," answered one of the seamen in accented French; he was a tall man who bore himself proudly. "There is no need to fear; yonder is *The Resolute Friend*; here are Hawksly's bullies. You have given us the prisoner. We will take him aboard and set sail. You have done your part; now we will do ours."

I was staring in fascination, having never seen Englishmen before. These were all tall men and stalwart, with goodly swords buckled at their hips, and steel glinting under their doublets. Never saw I such proud-seeming sailormen, or seamen so well armed. They had seized the man Étienne called Charles, and were haling him to the boat – which task seemed to be supervised by a tall portly man in a red cloak.

"Aye," said Renault, "yonder lies *The Resolute Friend*; I know her well, or I had never delivered my prisoner to you. But I know you not. Call Captain Hawksly, or I take my prisoner back again."

"Enough!" exclaimed the other arrogantly. "I tell you Hawksly cannot come. You do not know me – "

But de Valence, who had been listening closely to the other's voice, cried out sharply and fiercely.

"Nay, by God, I think I *do* know you, my lord!" And knocking off the seaman's bonnet the man wore, he disclosed a steel cap beneath, crowning a proud hawk-like face.

"So!" exclaimed de Valence. "You would take my prisoner – but not to slay – nay, to hold as a club over the head of François! Rogue I may be, but traitor to my king – never!"

And snatching forth a pistol he fired point-blank, not at the lord, but at the prisoner Charles.

But the Englishman knocked up his arm, and the ball went wide.

The next instant all was turmoil and confusion, as Renault's bravos rushed in in response to his shouts, and the Englishmen met them hand to hand. I saw the blades glimmer and flash in the moonlight as Renault and the English lord fought, and suddenly Renault's sword was dyed red and the Englishman was down, gasping out his life on the sand.

Now I saw that the men who had been haling along the prisoner Charles had hastened into the fray, leaving him in the hands of the portly man in the red cloak who was dragging him, despite his struggles, toward the boat drawn up on the beach. Now I heard the clack of oarlocks, and looking toward the ship, saw three other boats putting towards shore.

But even as I looked, I was whispering to Étienne, and we broke cover and ran silently across the stretch of white sand, toward the struggling pair near the beach. All about us raged the fight as the bravos, outnumbered but dangerous as wolves, slashed and parried and thrust with the reckless Englishmen.

Even as we came into the fray, an Englishman rushed at each of us. Étienne fired and missed – for moonlight is deceptive – and the next instant was fighting sword to sword. I did not fire until my muzzle almost touched my enemy's bosom, and when I pulled the trigger, the heavy ball tore through the chain-mail beneath his doublet like paper, and the lifted sword fell harmless into the sand.

A few more strides brought me up with Charles and his captor, but even as I reached them, one was before me. While men fought and slew and cursed madly, de Valence had never lost sight of his objective. Realizing that he could not retake his prisoner, he was determined on slaying him.

Now he had cut his way through the melee, and ran with grim purpose across the sands, his sword dripping in his hand. Running up to the prisoner, he cut murderously at his unprotected head. The stroke was parried, awkwardly, by the portly man in the red cloak, who began bawling for aid in a gasping, short-winded voice which went unheeded in the uproar of the melee. So ineptly had he parried that the sword was beaten out of his hand. But before de Valence could strike again, I came silently and swiftly up from the side, and thrust at him with all my strength, meaning to spit him through the neck, above the gorget. But again luck betrayed me; my foot slipped in the sand, and the point rasped harmlessly along his mail.

Instantly he turned and recognized me. He had lost his mask, and his eyes danced with a sort of reckless madness in the moonlight.

"By God!" he cried, with a wild laugh. "It is the red-haired sword-wench!"

Even as he spoke he parried my whistling blade, and with no further words, we set to work, slashing and thrusting. He drew blood from my sword-hand, and from my thigh, but I smote him with such fury that my

edge bit through his morion and into the scalp beneath, so that blood ran from under his burganet and trickled down his face. Another such stroke had finished him, but he, casting a quick glance aside, saw that most of his bravos were down, and he in desperate case. So with another wild laugh he bounded back, sprang aside, cut his way through those who sought to stay him, with half a dozen flailing strokes, and bounding clear, vanished in the shadows, whence presently emerged the sound of a running horse.

Now I whirled quickly to the prisoner, whose arm the portly man in red still gripped, puffing and panting, and slashing the cords that bound his arms, I thrust him toward the woods. But so wrought up was I that my push was more powerful than I intended, and sent him sprawling on all-fours.

The man in the red cloak squalled wildly and sprang to seize his captive again, but I buffeted him aside, and dragging Charles to his feet, bade him run. But he seemed half dazed by a chance blow of the flat of a blade on the pate. But now Étienne, his sword dripping red, ran forward and seizing the captive's arm, urged him toward the woods.

And the man in the red cloak, evidently in desperation, resorted to the tactics of de Valence, for catching up his sword, he ran at the back of Charles and hewed at him. But even as he did so, I smote him under the armpit with such power that he rolled in the sand, screaming like a stuck pig. Now divers of the English halted in their rush towards me, and shouted in horror and ran to pick up the fellow; for some of the links of his chain shirt had parted under my edge, and he had been wounded slightly, so that the blood oozed through his doublet.

They shouted a name that sounded like "Wolsey," and halted in their pursuit to lift him and see to his wound, while he cursed at them. And Étienne and I bore the rescued man between us into the woods, and to the horses where Françoise awaited us.

She stood like a white shadow under the moon-dappled trees, and when he saw her, he gave back with an exclamation.

"Oh, Charles," she exclaimed, "have pity! I had no choice – "

"I trusted you above all others," said he, more in sadness than anger.

"My Lord," said Étienne, touching his shoulder, "it is my privilege to tell you that what wrong has been done, has been righted this night as well as might be. If Françoise de Foix betrayed you, she has risked her life to rescue you. Now I beg of you, take these horses and ride, for none knows

what next may chance to befall. That was Cardinal Wolsey who led those men, and he is not easy to defeat."

Like a man in a dream the Duke of Bourbon mounted, and Étienne lifted Françoise de Foix up into the other saddle. They reined away and rode through the moonlight and so vanished. And I turned to Étienne.

"Well," said I, "with all our chivalry, here are we back where we began, without money, or means of reaching Italy; nay, you have even given away your horse! What shall be our next adventure?"

"I held Françoise de Foix in my arms," he answered. "After that, any adventure is but anticlimax for Étienne Villiers."

The Shadow of the Vulture

“Are the dogs dressed and gorged?”

“Aye, Protector of the Faithful.”

“Then let them crawl into the Presence.”

So they brought the envoys, pallid from months of imprisonment, before the canopied throne of Suleyman the Magnificent, Sultan of Turkey, and the mightiest monarch in an age of mighty monarchs. Under the great purple dome of the royal chamber gleamed the throne before which the world trembled – gold-panelled, pearl-inlaid. An emperor’s wealth in gems was sewn into the silken canopy from which depended a shimmering string of pearls ending a frieze of emeralds which hung like a halo of glory above Suleyman’s head. Yet the splendor of the throne was paled by the glitter of the figure upon it, bedecked in jewels, the aigret feather rising above the diamonded white turban. About the throne stood his nine viziers, in attitudes of humility, and warriors of the imperial bodyguard ranged the dais – Solaks in armor, black and white and scarlet plumes nodding above the gilded helmets.

The envoys from Austria were properly impressed – the more so as they had had nine weary months for reflection in the grim Castle of the Seven Towers that overlooks the Sea of Marmora. The head of the embassy choked down his choler and cloaked his resentment in a semblance of submission – a strange cloak on the shoulders of Habordansky, general of Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria. His rugged head bristled incongruously from the flaming silk robes presented him by the contemptuous Sultan, as he was brought before the throne, his arms gripped fast by stalwart Janizaries. Thus were foreign envoys presented to the sultans, ever since

that red day by Kossova when Milosh Kabilovitch, knight of slaughtered Serbia, had slain the conqueror Murad with a hidden dagger.

The Grand Turk regarded Habordansky with scant favor. Suleyman was a tall, slender man, with a thin down-curving nose and a thin straight mouth, the resolution of which his drooping mustachios did not soften. His narrow outward-curving chin was shaven. The only suggestion of weakness was in the slender, remarkably long neck, but that suggestion was belied by the hard lines of the slender figure, the glitter of the dark eyes. There was more than a suggestion of the Tatar about him – rightly so, since he was no more the son of Selim the Grim, than of Hafsza Khatun, princess of Crimea. Born to the purple, heir to the mightiest military power in the world, he was crested with authority and cloaked in pride that recognized no peer beneath the gods.

Under his eagle gaze old Habordansky bent his head to hide the sullen rage in his eyes. Nine months before, the general had come to Stamboul representing his master, the Archduke, with proposals for truce and the disposition of the iron crown of Hungary, torn from the dead king Louis' head on the bloody field of Mohacz, where the Grand Turk's armies opened the road to Europe. There had been another emissary before him – Jerome Lasczky, the Polish count palatine. Habordansky, with the bluntness of his breed, had claimed the Hungarian crown for his master, rousing Suleyman's ire. Lasczky had, like a suppliant, asked on his bended knees that crown for his countrymen at Mohacz.

To Lasczky had been given honor, gold and promises of patronage, for which he had paid with pledges abhorrent even to his avaricious soul – selling his ally's subjects into slavery, and opening the road through the subject territory to the very heart of Christendom.

All this was made known to Habordansky, frothing with fury in the prison to which the arrogant resentment of the Sultan had assigned him. Now Suleyman looked contemptuously at the staunch old general, and dispensed with the usual formality of speaking through the mouthpiece of the Grand Vizier. A royal Turk would not deign to admit knowledge of any Frankish tongue, but Habordansky understood Turki. The Sultan's remarks were brief and without preamble.

"Say to your master that I now make ready to visit him in his own lands, and that if he fails to meet me at Mohacz or at Pesth, I will meet him beneath the walls of Vienna."

Habordansky bowed, not trusting himself to speak. At a scornful wave of the imperial hand, an officer of the court came forward and bestowed upon the general a small gilded bag containing two hundred ducats. Each member of his retinue, waiting patiently at the other end of the chamber, under the spears of the Janizaries, was likewise so guerdoned. Habordansky mumbled thanks, his knotty hands clenched about the gift with unnecessary vigor. The Sultan grinned thinly, well aware that the ambassador would have hurled the coins into his face, had he dared. He half-lifted his hand, in token of dismissal, then paused, his eyes resting on the group of men who composed the general's suite – or rather, on one of these men. This man was the tallest in the room, strongly built, wearing his Turkish gift-garments clumsily. At a gesture from the Sultan he was brought forward in the grasp of the soldiers.

Suleyman stared at him narrowly. The Turkish vest and voluminous khalat could not conceal the lines of massive strength. His tawny hair was close-cropped, his sweeping yellow mustaches drooping below a stubborn chin. His blue eyes seemed strangely clouded; it was as if the man slept on his feet, with his eyes open.

"Do you speak Turki?" The Sultan did the fellow the stupendous honor of addressing him directly. Through all the pomp of the Ottoman court there remained in the Sultan some of the simplicity of Tatar ancestors.

"Yes, your majesty," answered the Frank.

"Who are you?"

"Men name me Gottfried von Kalmbach."

Suleyman scowled and unconsciously his fingers wandered to his shoulder, where, under his silken robes, he could feel the outlines of an old scar.

"I do not forget faces. Somewhere I have seen yours – under circumstances that etched it into the back of my mind. But I am unable to recall those circumstances."

"I was at Rhodes," offered the German.

"Many men were at Rhodes," snapped Suleyman.

"Aye," agreed von Kalmbach tranquilly. "De l'Isle Adam was there."

Suleyman stiffened and his eyes glittered at the name of the Grand Master of the Knights of Saint John, whose desperate defense of Rhodes had cost the Turk sixty thousand men. He decided, however, that the Frank was not clever enough for the remark to carry any subtle thrust, and

dismissed the embassy with a wave. The envoys were backed out of the Presence and the incident was closed. The Franks would be escorted out of Stamboul, and to the nearest boundaries of the empire. The Turk's warning would be carried post-haste to the Archduke, and soon on the heels of that warning would come the armies of the Sublime Porte. Suleyman's officers knew that the Grand Turk had more in mind than merely establishing his puppet Zapolya on the conquered Hungarian throne. Suleyman's ambitions embraced all Europe – that stubborn Frankistan which had for centuries sporadically poured forth hordes chanting and pillaging into the East, whose illogical and wayward peoples had again and again seemed ripe for Moslem conquest, yet who had always emerged, if not victorious, at least unconquered.

It was the evening of the morning on which the Austrian emissaries departed that Suleyman, brooding on his throne, raised his lean head and beckoned his Grand Vizier Ibrahim, who approached with confidence. The Grand Vizier was always sure of his master's approbation; was he not cup-companion and boyhood comrade of the Sultan? Ibrahim had but one rival in his master's favor – the red-haired Russian girl, Khurrem the Joyous, whom Europe knew as Roxelana, whom slavers had dragged from her father's house in Rogatino to be the Sultan's *harim* favorite.

"I remember the infidel at last," said Suleyman. "Do you recall the first charge of the knights at Mohacz?"

Ibrahim winced slightly at the allusion.

"Oh, Protector of the Pitiful, is it likely that I should forget an occasion on which the divine blood of my master was spilt by an unbeliever?"

"Then you remember that thirty-two knights, the paladins of the Nazarenes, drove headlong into our array, each having pledged his life to cut down our person. By Allah, they rode like men riding to a wedding, their great horses and long lances overthrowing all who opposed them, and their plate-armor turned the finest steel. Yet they fell as the firelocks spoke until only three were left in the saddle – the knight Marczali and two companions. These paladins cut down my Solaks like ripe grain, but Marczali and one of his companions fell – almost at my feet.

"Yet one knight remained, though his vizored helmet had been torn from his head and blood started from every joint in his armor. He rode full at me,

swinging his great two-handed sword, and I swear by the beard of the Prophet, death was so nigh me that I felt the burning breath of Azrael on my neck!

“His sword flashed like lightning in the sky, and glancing from my casque, whereby I was half stunned so that blood gushed from my nose, rent the mail on my shoulder and gave me this wound, which irks me yet when the rains come. The Janizaries who swarmed around him cut the hocks of his horse, which brought him to earth as it went down, and the remnants of my Solaks bore me back out of the melee. Then the Hungarian host came on, and I saw not what became of the knight. But today I saw him again.”

Ibrahim started with an exclamation of incredulity.

“Nay, I could not mistake those blue eyes. How it is I know not, but the knight that wounded me at Mohacz was this German, Gottfried von Kalmbach.”

“But, Defender of the Faith,” protested Ibrahim, “the heads of those dog-knights were heaped before thy royal pavilion – ”

“And I counted them and said nothing at the time, lest men think I held thee in blame,” answered Suleyman. “There were but thirty-one. Most were so mutilated I could tell little of the features. But somehow the infidel escaped, who gave me this blow. I love brave men, but our blood is not so common that an unbeliever may with impunity spill it on the ground for the dogs to lap up. See ye to it.”

Ibrahim salaamed deeply and withdrew. He made his way through broad corridors to a blue-tiled chamber whose gold-arched windows looked out on broad galleries, shaded by cypress and plane-trees, and cooled by the spray of silvery fountains. There at his summons came one Yaruk Khan, a Crim Tatar, a slant-eyed impassive figure in harness of lacquered leather and burnished bronze.

“Dog-brother,” said the Vizier, “did thy koumiss-clouded gaze mark the tall German lord who served the emir Habordansky – the lord whose hair is tawny as a lion’s mane?”

“Aye, *noyon*, he who is called Gombuk.”

“The same. Take a *chambul* of thy dog-brothers and go after the Franks. Bring back this man and thou shalt be rewarded. The persons of envoys are sacred, but this matter is not official,” he added cynically.

“To hear is to obey!” With a salaam as profound as that accorded to the Sultan himself, Yaruk Khan backed out of the presence of the second man of the empire.

He returned some days later, dusty, travel-stained, and without his prey. On him Ibrahim bent an eye full of menace, and the Tatar prostrated himself before the silken cushions on which the Grand Vizier sat, in the blue chamber with the gold-arched windows.

“Great khan, let not thine anger consume thy slave. The fault was not mine, by the beard of the Prophet.”

“Squat on thy mangy haunches and bay out the tale,” ordered Ibrahim considerately.

“Thus it was, my lord,” began Yaruk Khan. “I rode swiftly, and though the Franks and their escort had a long start, and pushed on through the night without halting, I came up with them the next midday. But lo, Gombuk was not among them, and when I inquired after him, the paladin Habordansky replied only with many great oaths, like to the roaring of a cannon. So I spoke with various of the escort who understood the speech of these infidels, and learned what had come to pass. Yet I would have my lord remember that I only repeat the words of the Spahis of the escort, who are men without honor and lie like – ”

“Like a Tatar,” said Ibrahim.

Yaruk Khan acknowledged the compliment with a wide dog-like grin, and continued, “This they told me. At dawn Gombuk drew horse away from the rest, and the emir Habordansky demanded of him the reason. Then Gombuk laughed in the manner of the Franks – huh! huh! huh! – so. And Gombuk said, ‘The devil of good your service has done me, so I cool my heels for nine months in a Turkish prison. Suleyman has given us safe conduct over the border and I am not compelled to ride with you.’ ‘You dog,’ said the emir, ‘there is war in the wind and the Archduke has need of your sword.’ ‘Devil eat the Archduke,’ answered Gombuk; ‘Zapolya is a dog because he stood aside at Mohacz, and let us, his comrades, be cut to pieces, but Ferdinand is a dog too. When I am penniless I sell him my sword. Now I have two hundred ducats and these robes which I can sell to any Jew for a handful of silver, and may the devil bite me if I draw sword for any man while I have a penny left. I’m for the nearest Christian tavern,

and you and the Archduke may go to the devil.' Then the emir cursed him with many great curses, and Gombuk rode away laughing, huh! huh! huh!, and singing a song about a cockroach named – "

"Enough!" Ibrahim's features were dark with rage. He plucked savagely at his beard, reflecting that in the allusion to Mohacz, von Kalmbach had practically clinched Suleyman's suspicion. That matter of thirty-one heads when there should have been thirty-two was something no Turkish sultan would be likely to overlook. Officials had lost positions and their own heads over more trivial matters. The manner in which Suleyman had acted showed his almost incredible fondness and consideration for his Grand Vizier, but Ibrahim, vain though he was, was shrewd and wished no slightest shadow to come between him and his sovereign.

"Could you not have tracked him down, dog?" he demanded.

"By Allah," swore the uneasy Tatar, "he must have ridden on the wind. He crossed the border hours ahead of me, and I followed him as far as I dared – "

"Enough of excuses," interrupted Ibrahim. "Send Mikhal Oglu to me."

The Tatar departed thankfully. Ibrahim was not tolerant of failure in any man.

The Grand Vizier brooded on his silken cushions until the shadow of a pair of vulture wings fell across the marble-tiled floor, and the lean figure he had summoned bowed before him. The man whose very name was a shuddering watchword of horror to all western Asia was soft-spoken and moved with the mincing ease of a cat, but the stark evil of his soul showed in his dark countenance, gleamed in his narrow slit eyes. He was the chief of the Akinji, those wild riders whose raids spread fear and desolation throughout all lands beyond the Grand Turk's borders. He stood in full armor, a jeweled helmet on his narrow head, the wide vulture wings made fast to the shoulders of his gilded chain-mail hauberk. Those wings spread wide in the wind when he rode, and under their pinions lay the shadows of death and destruction. It was Suleyman's scimitar-tip, the most noted slayer of a nation of slayers, who stood before the Grand Vizier.

"Soon you will precede the hosts of our master into the lands of the infidel," said Ibrahim. "It will be your order, as always, to strike and spare not. You will waste the fields and the vineyards of the Caphars, you will

burn their villages, you will strike down their men with arrows, and lead away their wenches captive. Lands beyond our line of march will cry out beneath your heel."

"That is good hearing, Favored of Allah," answered Mikhal Oglu in his soft courteous voice.

"Yet there is an order within the order," continued Ibrahim, fixing a piercing eye on the Akinji. "You know the German, von Kalmbach?"

"Aye – Gombuk as the Tatars call him."

"So. This is my command – whoever fights or flees, lives or dies – this man must not live. Search him out wherever he lies, though the hunt carry you to the very banks of the Rhine. When you bring me his head, your reward shall be thrice its weight in gold."

"To hear is to obey, my lord. Men say he is the vagabond son of a noble German family, whose ruin has been wine and women. They say he was once a Knight of Saint John, until cast forth for guzzling and – "

"Yet do not underrate him," answered Ibrahim grimly. "Sot he may be, but if he rode with Marczali, he is not to be despised. See thou to it!"

"There is no den where he can hide from me, oh Favored of Allah," declared Mikhal Oglu, "no night dark enough to conceal him, no forest thick enough. If I bring you not his head, I give him leave to send you mine."

"Enough!" Ibrahim grinned and tugged at his beard, well pleased. "You have my leave to go."

The sinister vulture-winged figure went springily and silently from the blue chamber, nor could Ibrahim guess that he was taking the first steps in a feud which should spread over years and far lands, swirling in dark tides to draw in thrones and kingdoms and red-haired women more beautiful than the flames of hell.

II

In a small thatched hut in a village not far from the Danube, lusty snores resounded where a figure reclined in state on a ragged cloak thrown over a heap of straw. It was the paladin Gottfried von Kalmbach who slept the sleep of innocence and ale. The velvet vest, voluminous silken trousers, khalat and shagreen boots, gifts from a contemptuous sultan, were nowhere in evidence. The paladin was clad in worn leather and rusty mail. Hands tugged at him, breaking his sleep, and he swore drowsily.

“Wake up, my lord! Oh, wake, good knight – good pig – good dog-soul – will you wake, then?”

“Fill my flagon, host,” mumbled the slumberer. “Who? – what? May the dogs bite you, Ivga! I’ve not another asper – not a penny. Go off like a good lass and let me sleep.”

The girl renewed her tugging and shaking.

“Oh dolt! Rise! Gird on your spit! There are happenings forward!”

“Ivga,” muttered Gottfried, pulling away from her attack, “take my burganet to the Jew. He’ll give you enough for it to get drunk again.”

“Fool!” she cried in despair. “It isn’t money I want! The whole east is aflame, and none knows the reason thereof!”

“Has the rain ceased?” asked von Kalmbach, taking some interest in the proceedings at last.

“The rain ceased hours ago. You can only hear the drip from the thatch. Put on your sword and come out into the street. The men of the village are all drunk on your last silver, and the women know not what to think or do. Ah!”

The exclamation was broken from her by the sudden upleaping of a weird illumination which shone through the crevices of the hut. The German got unsteadily to his feet, quickly girt on the great two-handed sword and stuck his dented burganet on his cropped locks. Then he followed the girl into the straggling street. She was a slender young thing, barefooted, clad only in a short tunic-like garment, through the wide rents of which gleamed generous expanses of white flesh.

There seemed no life or movement in the village. Nowhere showed a light. Water dripped steadily from the eaves of the thatched roofs. Puddles in the muddy streets gleamed black. Wind sighed and moaned eerily through the black sodden branches of the trees which pressed in bulwarks of darkness about the little village, and in the southeast, towering higher into the leaden sky, rose the lurid crimson glow that set the dank clouds to smoldering. The girl Ivga cringed close to the tall German, whimpering.

“I’ll tell you what it is, my girl,” said he, scanning the glow. “It’s Suleyman’s devils. They’ve crossed the river and they’re burning the villages. Aye, I’ve seen glares like that in the sky before. I’ve expected him before now, but these cursed rains we’ve had for weeks must have held him back. Aye, it’s the Akinji, right enough, and they won’t stop this side of Vienna. Look you, my girl, go quickly and quietly to the stable behind the hut and bring me my gray stallion. We’ll slip out like mice from between the devil’s fingers. The stallion will carry us both, easily.”

“But the people of the village!” she sobbed, wringing her hands.

“Eh, well,” he said, “God rest them; the men have drunk my ale valiantly and the women have been kind – but horns of Satan, girl, the gray nag won’t carry a whole village!”

“Go you!” she returned. “I’ll stay and die with my people!”

“The Turks won’t kill you,” he answered. “They’ll sell you to a fat old Stamboul merchant who’ll beat you. I won’t stay to be cut open, and neither shall you – ”

A terrible scream from the girl cut him short and he wheeled at the awful terror in her flaring eyes. Even as he did so, a hut at the lower end of the village sprang into flames, the sodden material burning slowly. A medley of

screams and maddened yells followed the cry of the girl. In the sluggish light figures danced and capered wildly. Gottfried, straining his eyes in the shadows, saw shapes swarming over the low mud wall which drunkenness and negligence had left unguarded.

“Damnation!” he muttered. “The accursed ones have ridden ahead of their fire. They’ve stolen on the village in the dark – come on, girl – ”

But even as he caught her white wrist to drag her away, and she screamed and fought against him like a wild thing, mad with fear, the mud wall crashed at the point nearest them. It crumpled under the impact of a score of horses, and into the doomed village reined the riders, distinct in the growing light. Huts were flaring up on all hands, screams rising to the dripping clouds as the invaders dragged shrieking women and drunken men from their hovels and cut their throats. Gottfried saw the lean figures of the horsemen, the firelight gleaming on their burnished steel; he saw the vulture wings on the shoulders of the foremost. Even as he recognized Mikhal Oglu, he saw the chief stiffen and point.

“At him, dogs!” yelled the Akinji, his voice no longer soft, but strident as the rasp of a drawn saber. “It is Gombuk! Five hundred aspers to the man who brings me his head!”

With a curse von Kalmbach bounded for the shadows of the nearest hut, dragging the screaming girl with him. Even as he leaped, he heard the twang of bowstrings, and the girl sobbed and went limp in his grasp. She sank down at his feet, and in the lurid glare he saw the feathered end of an arrow quivering under her heart. With a low rumble he turned toward his assailants as a fierce bear turns at bay. An instant he stood, head out-thrust truculently, sword gripped in both hands; then, as a bear gives back from the onset of the hunters, he turned and fled about the hut, arrows whistling about him and glancing from the rings of his mail. There were no shots; the ride through that dripping forest had dampened the powder-flasks of the raiders.

Von Kalmbach quartered about the back of the hut, mindful of the fierce yells behind him, and gained the shed behind the hut he had occupied, wherein he stabled his gray stallion. Even as he reached the door, someone snarled like a panther in the semi-dark and cut viciously at him. He parried the stroke with the lifted sword and struck back with all the power of his broad shoulders. The great blade glanced stunningly from the Akinji’s polished helmet and rent through the mail links of his hauberk, tearing the

arm from the shoulder. The Muhammadan sank down with a groan, and the German sprang over his prostrate form. The gray stallion, wild with fear and excitement, neighed shrilly and reared as his master sprang on his back. No time for saddle or bridle. Gottfried dug his heels into the quivering flanks and the great steed shot through the door like a thunderbolt, knocking men right and left like tenpins. Across the firelit open space between the burning huts he raced, clearing crumpled corpses in his stride, splashing his rider from heel to head as he thrashed through the puddles.

The Akinji made after the flying rider, loosing their shafts and giving tongue like hounds. Those mounted spurred after him, while those who had entered the village on foot ran through the broken wall for their horses.

Arrows flickered about Gottfried's head as he put his steed at the only point open to him – the unbroken western wall. It was touch and go, for the footing was tricky and treacherous and never had the gray stallion attempted such a leap. Gottfried held his breath as he felt the great body beneath him gathering and tensing in full flight for the desperate effort; then with a volcanic heave of mighty thews the stallion rose in the air and cleared the barrier with scarce an inch to spare. The pursuers yelled in amazement and fury, and reined back. Born horsemen though they were, they dared not attempt that break-neck leap. They lost time seeking gates and breaks in the wall, and when they finally emerged from the village, the black, dank, whispering, dripping forest had swallowed up their prey.

Mikhal Oglu swore like a fiend and leaving his lieutenant Othman in charge with instructions to leave no living human being in the village, he pressed on after the fugitive, following the trail, by torches, in the muddy mold, and swearing to run him down, if the road led under the very walls of Vienna.

III

Allah did not will it that Mikhal Oglu should take Gottfried von Kalmbach's head in the dark, dripping forest. He knew the country better than they, and in spite of their zeal, they lost his trail in the darkness. Dawn found Gottfried riding through terror-stricken farmlands, with the flame of a burning world lighting the east and south. The country was thronged with fugitives, staggering under pitiful loads of household goods, driving bellowing cattle, like people fleeing the end of the world. The torrential rains that had offered false promise of security had not long stayed the march of the Grand Turk.

With a quarter-million followers he was ravaging the eastern marches of Christendom. While Gottfried had loitered in the taverns of isolated villages, drinking up the Sultan's bounty, Pesth and Buda had fallen, the German soldiers of the latter having been slaughtered by the Janizaries, after promises of safety sworn by Suleyman, whom men named the Generous.

While Ferdinand and the nobles and bishops squabbled at the Diet of Spires, the elements alone seemed to war for Christendom. Rain fell in torrents, and through the floods that changed plains and forest-bed to dank morasses, the Turks struggled grimly. They drowned in raging rivers, and lost great stores of ammunition, ordnance and supplies when boats capsized, bridges gave way, and wagons mired. But on they came, driven by the implacable will of Suleyman, and now in September, 1529, over the ruins of Hungary, the Turk swept on Europe, with the Akinji – the Sackmen – ravaging the land like the drift ahead of a storm.

This in part Gottfried learned from the fugitives as he pushed his weary stallion toward the city which was the only sanctuary for the panting thousands. Behind him the skies flamed red and the screams of butchered victims came dimly down the wind to his ears. Sometimes he could even make out the swarming black masses of wild horsemen. The wings of the vulture beat horrifically over that butchered land and the shadows of those great wings fell across all Europe. Again the destroyer was riding out of the blue mysterious East as his brothers had ridden before him – Attila – Subotai – Bayazid – Muhammad the Conqueror. But never before had such a storm risen against the West.

Before the waving vulture wings the road thronged with wailing fugitives; behind them it ran red and silent, strewn with mangled shapes that cried no more. The killers were not a half-hour behind him when Gottfried von Kalmbach rode his reeling stallion through the gates of Vienna. The people on the walls had heard the wailing for hours, rising awfully on the wind, and now afar they saw the sun flicker on the points of lances as the horsemen rode in amongst the masses of fugitives toiling down from the hills into the plain which girdles the city. They saw the play of naked steel like sickles among ripe grain.

Von Kalmbach found the city in turmoil, the people swirling and screaming about Count Nikolas Salm, the seventy-years-old warhorse who commanded Vienna, and his aides, Roggendrof, Count Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics. Salm was working with frantic haste, levelling houses near the walls and using their material to brace the ramparts, which were old and unstable, nowhere more than six feet thick, and in many places crumbling and falling down. The outer palisade was so frail it bore the name of Stadtzaun – city hedge.

But under the lashing energy of Count Salm, a new wall twenty feet high was thrown up from the Stuben to the Karnthner Gate. Ditches interior to the old moat were dug, and ramparts erected from the drawbridge to the Salz Gate. Roofs were stripped of shingles, to lessen the chances of fire, and paving was ripped up to soften the impact of cannon-balls.

The suburbs had been deserted, and now they were fired lest they give shelter to the besiegers. In the process, which was carried out in the very teeth of the oncoming Sackmen, conflagrations broke out in the city and added to the delirium. It was all hell and bedlam turned loose, and in the midst of it, five thousand wretched noncombatants, old men and women and children, were ruthlessly driven from the gates to shift for themselves, and their screams, as the Akinjis swooped down, maddened the people within the walls. These hellions were arriving by thousands, topping the sky-lines and sweeping down on the city in irregular squadrons, like vultures gathering about a dying camel. Within an hour after the first swarm had appeared, no Christian remained alive outside the gates, except those bound by long ropes to the saddle-peaks of their captors and forced to run at full speed or be dragged to death. The wild riders swirled about the walls, yelling and loosing their shafts. Men on the towers recognized the dread Mikhal Oglu by the wings on his cuirass, and noted that he rode from one

heap of dead to another, avidly scanning each corpse in turn, pausing to glare questioningly at the battlements.

Meanwhile, from the west, a band of German and Spanish troops cut their way through a cordon of Sackmen and marched into the streets to the accompaniment of frenzied cheers, Philip the Palgrave at their head.

Gottfried von Kalmbach leaned on his sword and watched them pass in their gleaming breastplates and plumed crested helmets, with long matchlocks on their shoulders and two-handed swords strapped to their steel-clad backs. He was a curious contrast in his rusty chain-mail, old-fashioned harness picked up here and there and slovenly pieced together – he seemed like a figure out of the past, rusty and tarnished, watching a newer, brighter generation go by. Yet Philip saluted him, with a glance of recognition, as the shining column swung past.

Von Kalmbach started toward the walls, where the gunners were firing frugally at the Akinji, who showed some disposition to climb upon the bastions on lariats thrown from their saddles. But on the way he heard that Salm was impressing nobles and soldiers in the task of digging moats and rearing new earthworks, and in great haste he took refuge in a tavern, where he bullied the host, a knock-kneed and apprehensive Wallachian, into giving him credit, and rapidly drank himself into a state where no one would have considered asking him to do work of any kind.

Shots, shouts and screams reached his ears, but he paid scant heed. He knew that the Akinji would strike and pass on, to ravage the country beyond. He learned from the tavern talk that Salm had 20,000 pikemen, 2,000 horsemen and 1,000 volunteer citizens to oppose Suleyman’s hordes, together with seventy guns – cannons, demi-cannons and culverins. The news of the Turks’ numbers numbed all hearts with dread – all but von Kalmbach’s. He was a fatalist in his way. But he discovered a conscience in ale, and was presently brooding over the people the miserable Viennese had driven forth to perish. The more he drank the more melancholy he became, and maudlin tears dripped from the drooping ends of his mustaches.

At last he rose unsteadily and took up his great sword, muzzily intent on challenging Count Salm to a duel because of the matter. He bellowed down the timid importunities of the Wallachian and weaved out on the street. To his groggy sight the towers and spires cavorted crazily; people jostled him,

knocking him aside as they ran about aimlessly. Philip the Palgrave strode by clanking in his armor, the keen dark faces of his Spaniards contrasting with the square, florid countenances of the Lanzknechts.

“Shame on you, von Kalmbach!” said Philip sternly. “The Turk is upon us, and you keep your snout shoved in an ale-pot!”

“Whose snout is in what ale-pot?” demanded Gottfried, weaving in an erratic half-circle as he fumbled at his sword. “Devil bite you, Philip, I’ll rap your pate for that – ”

The Palgrave was already out of sight, and eventually Gottfried found himself on the Karnthner Tower, only vaguely aware of how he had got there. But what he saw sobered him suddenly. The Turk was indeed upon Vienna. The plain was covered with his tents, thirty thousand, some said, and swore that from the lofty spire of Saint Stephen’s cathedral a man could not see their limits. Four hundred of his boats lay on the Danube, and Gottfried heard men cursing the Austrian fleet which lay helpless far upstream, because its sailors, long unpaid, refused to man the ships. He also heard that Salm had made no reply at all to Suleyman’s demand to surrender.

Now, partly as a gesture, partly to awe the Caphar dogs, the Grand Turk’s array was moving in orderly procession before the ancient walls before settling down to the business of the siege. The sight was enough to awe the stoutest. The low-swinging sun struck fire from polished helmet, jeweled saber-hilt and lance-point. It was as if a river of shining steel flowed leisurely and terribly past the walls of Vienna.

The Akinji, who ordinarily formed the vanguard of the host, had swept on, but in their place rode the Tatars of Crimea, crouching on their high-peaked, short-stirruped saddles, their gnome-like heads guarded by iron helmets, their stocky bodies with bronze breastplates and lacquered leather. Behind them came the Azabs, the irregular infantry, Kurds and Arabs for the most part, a wild motley horde. Then their brothers, the Delis, the Madcaps, wild men on tough ponies fantastically adorned with fur and feathers. The riders wore caps and mantles of leopard skin; their unshorn hair hung in tangled strands about their high shoulders, and over their matted beards their eyes glared the madness of fanaticism and bhang.

After them came the real body of the army. First the beys and emirs with their retainers – horsemen and footmen from the feudal fiefs of Asia Minor. Then the Spahis, the heavy cavalry, on splendid steeds. And last of all the

real strength of the Turkish empire – the most terrible military organization in the world – the Janizaries. On the walls men spat in black fury, recognizing kindred blood. For the Janizaries were not Turks. With a few exceptions, where Turkish parents had smuggled their offspring into the ranks to save them from the grinding life of a peasant, they were sons of Christians – Greeks, Serbs, Hungarians – stolen in infancy and raised in the ranks of Islam, knowing but one master – the Sultan; but one occupation – slaughter.

Their beardless features contrasted with those of their Oriental masters. Many had blue eyes and yellow mustaches. But all their faces were stamped with the wolfish ferocity to which they had been reared. Under their dark blue cloaks glinted fine mail, and many wore steel skull-caps under their curious high-peaked hats, from which depended a white sleeve-like piece of cloth, and through which was thrust a copper spoon. Long bird-of-paradise plumes likewise adorned these strange head-pieces.

Besides scimitars, pistols and daggers, each Janizary bore a matchlock, and their officers carried pots of coals for the lighting of the matches. Up and down the ranks scurried the dervishes, clad only in kalpaks of camel-hair and green aprons fringed with ebony beads, exhorting the Faithful. Military bands, the invention of the Turk, marched with the columns, cymbals clashing, lutes twanging. Over the flowing sea the banners tossed and swayed – the crimson flag of the Spahis, the white banner of the Janizaries with its two-edged sword worked in gold, and the horse-tail standards of the rulers – seven tails for the Sultan, six for the Grand Vizier, three for the Agha of the Janizaries. So Suleyman paraded his power before despairing Caphar eyes.

But von Kalmbach’s gaze was centered on the groups that labored to set up the ordnance of the Sultan. And he shook his head in bewilderment.

“Demi-culverins, sakers, and falconets!” he grunted. “Where the devil’s all the heavy artillery Suleyman’s so proud of?”

“At the bottom of the Danube!” A Hungarian pikeman grinned fiercely and spat as he answered. “Wulf Hagen sank that part of the Soldan’s flotilla. The rest of his cannon and cannon royal, they say, were mired because of the rains.”

A slow grin bristled Gottfried’s mustache.

“What was Suleyman’s word to Salm?”

“That he’d eat breakfast in Vienna day after tomorrow – the 29th.”

Gottfried shook his head ponderously.

IV

The siege commenced, with the roaring of cannons, the whistling of arrows, and the blasting crash of matchlocks. The Janizaries took possession of the ruined suburbs, where fragments of walls gave them shelter. Under a screen of irregulars and a volley of arrow-fire, they advanced methodically just after dawn.

On a gun-turret on the threatened wall, leaning on his great sword and meditatively twisting his mustache, Gottfried von Kalmbach watched a Transylvanian gunner being carried off the wall, his brains oozing from a hole in his head; a Turkish matchlock had spoken too near the walls. The field-pieces of the Sultan were barking like deep-toned dogs, knocking chips off the battlements. The Janizaries were advancing, kneeling, firing, reloading as they came on. Bullets glanced from the crenelles and whined off venomously into space. One flattened against Gottfried's hauberk, bringing an outraged grunt from him. Turning toward the abandoned gun, he saw a colorful, incongruous figure bending over the massive breech.

It was a woman, dressed as von Kalmbach had not seen even the dandies of France dressed. She was tall, splendidly shaped, but lithe. From under a steel cap escaped rebellious tresses that rippled red gold in the sun over her compact shoulders. High boots of Cordovan leather came to her mid-thighs, which were cased in baggy breeches. She wore a shirt of fine Turkish mesh-mail tucked into her breeches. Her supple waist was confined by a flowing sash of green silk, into which were thrust a brace of pistols and a dagger, and from which depended a long Hungarian saber. Over all was carelessly thrown a scarlet cloak.

This surprizing figure was bending over the cannon, sighting it, in a manner betokening more than a passing familiarity, at a group of Turks who were wheeling a carriage-gun just within range.

"Eh, Red Sonya!" shouted a man-at-arms, waving his pike. "Give 'em hell, my lass!"

"Trust me, dog-brother," she retorted as she applied the glowing match to the vent. "But I wish my mark was Roxelana's – "

A terrific detonation drowned her words and a swirl of smoke blinded every one on the turret, as the terrific recoil of the overcharged cannon knocked the firer flat on her back. She sprang up like a spring rebounding

and rushed to the embrasure, peering eagerly through the smoke, which clearing, showed the ruin of the gun crew. The huge ball, bigger than a man’s head, had smashed full into the group clustered about the saker, and now they lay on the torn ground, their skulls blasted by the impact, or their bodies mangled by the flying iron splinters from their shattered gun. A cheer went up from the towers, and the woman called Red Sonya yelled with sincere joy and did the steps of a Cossack dance.

Gottfried approached, eying in open admiration the splendid swell of her bosom beneath the pliant mail, the curves of her ample hips and rounded limbs. She stood as a man might stand, booted legs braced wide apart, thumbs hooked into her girdle, but she was all woman. She was laughing as she faced him, and he noted with fascination the dancing sparkling lights and changing colors of her eyes. She raked back her rebellious locks with a powder-stained hand and he wondered at the clear pinky whiteness of her firm flesh where it was unstained.

“Why did you wish for the Sultana Roxelana for a target, my girl?” he asked.

“Because she’s my sister, the slut!” answered Sonya.

At that instant a great cry thundered over the walls and the girl started like a wild thing, ripping out her blade in a long flash of silver in the sun.

“I’ve heard that bellow!” she cried. “The Janizaries – ”

Gottfried was already on his way to the embrasures. He too had heard before the terrible soul-shaking shout of the charging Janizaries. Suleyman meant to waste no time on the city that barred him from helpless Europe.

He meant to crush its frail walls in one storm. The bashi-bazouki, the irregulars, died like flies to screen the main advance, and over heaps of their dead, the Janizaries thundered against Vienna. In the teeth of cannonade and musket volley they surged on, crossing the moats on scaling-ladders laid across, bridge-like. Whole ranks went down as the Austrian guns roared, but now the attackers were under the walls and the cumbrous balls whirred over their heads, to work havoc in the rear ranks.

The Spanish matchlock men, firing almost straight down, took ghastly toll, but now the ladders gripped the walls, and the chanting madmen surged upward. Arrows whistled, striking down the defenders. Behind them the Turkish field-pieces boomed, careless of injury to friend as well as foe. Gottfried, standing at an embrasure, was overthrown by a sudden terrific impact. A ball had smashed the merlon, braining half a dozen defenders.

Gottfried rose, half stunned, out of the debris of masonry and huddled corpses. He looked down into an uprushing waste of snarling, impassioned faces, where eyes glared like mad dogs' and blades glittered like sunbeams on water. Bracing his feet wide, he heaved up his great sword and lashed down. His jaw jutted out, his mustache bristled. The five-foot blade caved in steel caps and skulls, lashing through uplifted bucklers and iron shoulder-pieces. Men fell from the ladders, their nerveless fingers slipping from the bloody rungs.

But they swarmed through the breach on either side of him. A terrible cry announced that the Turks had a foothold on the wall. But no man dared leave his post to go to the threatened point. To the dazed defenders it seemed that Vienna was ringed by a glittering tossing sea that roared higher and higher about the doomed walls.

Stepping back to avoid being hemmed in, Gottfried grunted and lashed right and left. His eyes were no longer cloudy; they blazed like blue bale-fire. Three Janizaries were down at his feet; his broadsword clanged in a forest of slashing scimitars. A blade splintered on his basinet, filling his eyes with fire-shot blackness. Staggering, he struck back and felt his great blade crunch home. Blood jetted over his hands and he tore his sword clear. Then with a yell and a rush someone was at his side and he heard the quick splintering of mail beneath the madly flailing strokes of a saber that flashed like silver lightning before his clearing sight.

It was Red Sonya who had come to his aid, and her onslaught was no less terrible than that of a she-panther. Her strokes followed each other too quickly for the eye to follow; her blade was a blur of white fire, and men went down like ripe grain before the reaper. With a deep roar Gottfried strode to her side, bloody and terrible, swinging his great blade. Forced irresistibly back, the Moslems wavered on the edge of the wall, then leaped for the ladders or fell screaming through empty space.

Oaths flowed in a steady stream from Sonya's red lips and she laughed wildly as her saber sang home and blood spurted along the edge. The last Turk on the battlement screamed and parried wildly as she pressed him; then dropping his scimitar, his clutching hands closed desperately on her dripping blade. With a groan he swayed on the edge, blood gushing from his horribly cut fingers.

"Hell to you, dog-soul!" she laughed. "The devil can stir your broth for you!"

With a twist and a wrench she tore away her saber, severing the wretch's fingers; with a moaning cry he pitched backward and fell headlong.

On all sides the Janizaries were falling back. The field-pieces, halted while the fighting went on upon the walls, were booming again, and the Spaniards, kneeling at the embrasures, were returning the fire with their long matchlocks.

Gottfried approached Red Sonya, who was cleansing her blade, swearing softly.

"By God, my girl," said he, extending a huge hand, "had you not come to my aid, I think I'd have supped in hell this night. I thank – "

"Thank the devil!" retorted Sonya rudely, slapping his hand aside. "The Turks were on the wall. Don't think I risked my hide to save yours, dog-brother!"

And with a scornful flirt of her wide coat-tails, she swaggered off down the battlements, giving back promptly and profanely the rude sallies of the soldiers. Gottfried scowled after her, and a Lanzknecht slapped him jovially on the shoulder.

"Eh, she's a devil, that one! She drinks the strongest head under the table and outswears a Spaniard. She's no man's light o' love. Cut – slash – death to you, dog-soul! There's her way."

"Who is she, in the devil's name?" growled von Kalmbach.

“Red Sonya from Rogatino – that’s all we know. Marches and fights like a man – God knows why. Swears she’s sister to Roxelana, the Soldan’s favorite. If the Tatars who grabbed Roxelana that night had got Sonya, by Saint Piotr! Suleyman would have had a handful! Let her alone, sir brother; she’s a wildcat. Come and have a tankard of ale.”

The Janizaries, summoned before the Grand Vizier to explain why the attack failed after the wall had been scaled at one place, swore they had been confronted by a devil in the form of a red-headed woman, aided by a giant in rusty mail. Ibrahim discounted the woman, but the description of the man woke a half-forgotten memory in his mind. After dismissing the soldiers, he summoned the Tatar, Yaruk Khan, and dispatched him up-country to demand of Mikhal Oglu why he had not sent a certain head to the royal tent.

V

Suleyman did not eat his breakfast in Vienna on the morning of the 29th. He stood on the height of Semmering, before his rich pavilion with its gold-knobbed pinnacles and its guard of five hundred Solaks, and watched his light batteries pecking away vainly at the frail walls; he saw his irregulars wasting their lives like water, striving to fill the fosse, and he saw his sappers burrowing like moles, driving mines and counter-mines nearer and nearer the bastions.

Within the city there was little ease. Night and day the walls were manned. In their cellars the Viennese watched the faint vibrations of peas on drumheads that betrayed the sounds of digging in the earth that told of Turkish mines burrowing under the walls. They sank their counter-mines accordingly, and men fought no less fiercely under the earth than above.

Vienna was the one Christian island in a sea of infidels. Night by night men watched the horizons burning where the Akinji yet scoured the agonized land. Occasionally word came from the outer world – slaves escaping from the camp and slipping into the city. Always their news was fresh horror. In Upper Austria less than a third of the inhabitants were left alive; Mikhal Oglu was outdoing himself. And the people said that it was evident the vulture-winged one was looking for someone in particular. His slayers brought men’s heads and heaped them high before him; he avidly searched among the grisly relics, then, apparently in fiendish disappointment, drove his devils to new atrocities.

These tales, instead of paralyzing the Austrians with dread, fired them with the mad fury of desperation. Mines exploded, breaches were made and the Turks swarmed in, but always the desperate Christians were there before them, and in the choking, blind, wild-beast madness of hand-to-hand fighting they paid in part the red debt they owed.

September dwindled into October; the leaves turned brown and yellow on Wiener Wald, and the winds blew cold. The watchers shivered at night on the walls that whitened to the bite of the frost; but still the tents ringed the city; and still Suleyman sat in his magnificent pavilion and glared at the frail barrier that barred his imperial path. None but Ibrahim dared speak to

him; his mood was black as the cold nights that crept down from the northern hills. The wind that moaned outside his tent seemed a dirge for his ambitions of conquest.

Ibrahim watched him narrowly, and after a vain onset that lasted from dawn till midday, he called off the Janizaries and bade them retire into the ruined suburbs and rest. And he sent a bowman to shoot a very certain shaft into a very certain part of the city, where certain persons were waiting for just such an event.

No more attacks were made that day. The field-pieces, which had been pounding at the Karnthner Gate for days, were shifted northward, to hammer at the Burg. As an assault on that part of the wall seemed imminent, the bulk of the soldiery was shifted there. But the onslaught did not come, though the batteries kept up a steady fire, hour after hour. Whatever the reason, the soldiers gave thanks for the respite; they were dizzy with fatigue, mad with raw wounds and lack of sleep.

That night the great square, the Am Hof market, seethed with soldiers, while civilians looked on enviously. A great store of wine had been discovered hidden in the cellars of a rich Jewish merchant, who hoped to reap triple profit when all other liquor in the city was gone. In spite of their officers, the half-crazed men rolled the great hogsheads into the square and broached them. Salm gave up the attempt to control them. Better drunkenness, growled the old warhorse, than for the men to fall in their tracks from exhaustion. He paid the Jew from his own purse. In relays the soldiers came from the walls and drank deep.

In the glare of cressets and torches, to the accompaniment of drunken shouts and songs, to which the occasional rumble of a cannon played a sinister undertone, von Kalmbach dipped his basinet into a barrel and brought it out brimful and dripping. Sinking his mustache into the liquid, he paused as his clouded eyes, over the rim of the steel cap, rested on a strutting figure on the other side of the hogshead. Resentment touched his expression. Red Sonya had already visited more than one barrel. Her burganet was thrust sidewise on her rebellious locks, her swagger was wilder, her eyes more mocking.

“Ha!” she cried scornfully. “It’s the Turk-killer, with his nose deep in the keg, as usual! Devil bite all topers!”

She consistently thrust a jeweled goblet into the crimson flood and emptied it at a gulp. Gottfried stiffened resentfully. He had had a tilt with

Sonya already, and he still smarted.

"Why should I even look at you, in your ragged harness and empty purse," she had mocked, "when even Paul Bakics is mad for me? Go along, guzzler, beer-keg!"

"Be damned to you," he had retorted. "You needn't be so high, just because your sister is the Soldan's mistress – "

At that she had flown into an awful passion, and they had parted with mutual curses. Now, from the devil in her eyes, he saw that she intended making things further uncomfortable for him.

"Hussy!" he growled. "I'll drown you in this hogshead."

"Nay, you'll drown yourself first, boar-pig!" she shouted amid a roar of rough laughter. "A pity you aren't as valiant against the Turks as you are against the wine-butts!"

"Dogs bite you, slut!" he roared. "How can I break their heads when they stand off and pound us with cannon balls? Shall I throw my dagger at them from the wall?"

"There are thousands just outside," she retorted, in the grip of madness induced by drink and her own wild nature, "if any had the guts to go to them."

"By God!" the maddened giant dragged out his great sword. "No baggage can call *me* coward, sot or not! I'll go out upon them, if never a man follow me!"

Bedlam followed his bellow; the drunken temper of the crowd was fit for such madness. The nearly empty hogsheads were deserted as men tipsily drew sword and reeled toward the outer gates. Wulf Hagen fought his way into the storm, buffeting men right and left, shouting fiercely, "Wait, you drunken fools! Don't surge out in this shape! Wait – " They brushed him aside, sweeping on in a blind senseless torrent.

Dawn was just beginning to tip the eastern hills. Somewhere in the strangely silent Turkish camp a drum began to throb. Turkish sentries stared wildly and loosed their matchlocks in the air to warn the camp, appalled at the sight of the Christian horde pouring over the narrow drawbridge, eight thousand strong, brandishing swords and ale tankards. As they foamed over the moat a terrific explosion rent the din, and a portion of the wall near the

Karnthner Gate seemed to detach itself and rise into the air. A great shout rose from the Turkish camp, but the attackers did not pause.

They rushed headlong into the suburbs, and there they saw the Janizaries, not rousing from slumber, but fully clad and armed, being hurriedly drawn up in charging lines. Without pausing, they burst headlong into the half-formed ranks. Far outnumbered, their drunken fury and velocity was yet irresistible. Before the madly thrashing axes and lashing broadswords, the Janizaries reeled back dazed and disordered. The suburbs became a shambles where battling men, slashing and hewing at one another, stumbled on mangled bodies and severed limbs. Suleyman and Ibrahim, on the height of Semmering, saw the invincible Janizaries in full retreat, streaming out toward the hills.

In the city the rest of the defenders were working madly to repair the great breach the mysterious explosion had torn in the wall. Salm gave thanks for that drunken sortie. But for it, the Janizaries would have been pouring through the breach before the dust settled.

All was confusion in the Turkish camp. Suleyman ran to his horse and took charge in person, shouting at the Spahis. They formed ranks and swung down the slopes in orderly squadrons. The Christian warriors, still following their fleeing enemies, suddenly awakened to their danger. Before them the Janizaries were still falling back, but on either flank the horsemen of Asia were galloping to cut them off. Fear replaced drunken recklessness. They began to fall back, and the retreat quickly became a rout. Screaming in blind panic they threw away their weapons and fled for the drawbridge. The Turks rode them down to the water’s edge, and tried to follow them across the bridge, into the gates which were opened for them. And there at the bridge Wulf Hagen and his retainers met the pursuers and held them hard. The flood of the fugitives flowed past him to safety; on him the Turkish tide broke like a red wave. He loomed, a steel-clad giant, in a waste of spears.

Gottfried von Kalmbach did not voluntarily quit the field, but the rush of his companions swept him along the tide of flight, blaspheming bitterly. Presently he lost his footing and his panic-stricken comrades stampeded across his prostrate frame. When the frantic heels ceased to drum on his mail, he raised his head and saw that he was near the fosse, and naught but Turks about him. Rising, he ran lumberingly toward the moat, into which he

plunged unexpectedly, looking back over his shoulder at a pursuing Moslem.

He came up floundering and spluttering, and made for the opposite bank, splashing water like a buffalo. The blood-mad Muhammadan was close behind him – an Algerian corsair, as much at home in water as out. The stubborn German would not drop his great sword, and burdened by his mail, just managed to reach the other bank, where he clung, utterly exhausted and unable to lift a hand in defense as the Algerian swirled in, dagger gleaming above his naked shoulder. Then someone swore heartily on the bank hard by. A slim hand thrust a long pistol into the Algerian's face; he screamed as it exploded, making a ghastly ruin of his head. Another slim strong hand gripped the sinking German by the scruff of his mail.

"Grab the bank, fool!" gritted a voice, indicative of great effort. "I can't heave you up alone; you must weigh a ton. Pull, dolt, pull!"

Blowing, gasping and floundering, Gottfried half clambered, was half lifted, out of the moat. He showed some disposition to lie on his belly and retch, what of the dirty water he had swallowed, but his rescuer urged him to his feet.

"The Turks are crossing the bridge and the lads are closing the gates against them – haste, before we're cut off."

Inside the gate Gottfried stared about, as if waking from a dream.

"Where's Wulf Hagen? I saw him holding the bridge."

"Lying dead among twenty dead Turks," answered Red Sonya.

Gottfried sat down on a piece of fallen wall, and because he was shaken and exhausted, and still mazed with drink and blood-lust, he sank his face in his huge hands and wept. Sonya kicked him disgustedly.

"Name o' Satan, man, don't sit and blubber like a spanked schoolgirl. You drunkards had to play the fool, but that can't be mended. Come – let's go to the Walloon's tavern and drink ale."

"Why did you pull me out of the moat?" he asked.

"Because a great oaf like you never can help himself. I see you need a wise person like me to keep life in that hulking frame."

"But I thought you despised me!"

"Well, a woman can change her mind, can't she?" she snapped.

Along the walls the pikemen were repelling the frothing Moslems, thrusting them off the partly repaired breach. In the royal pavilion Ibrahim

was explaining to his master that the devil had undoubtedly inspired that drunken sortie just at the right moment to spoil the Grand Vizier’s carefully laid plans. Suleyman, wild with fury, spoke shortly to his friend for the first time.

“Nay, thou hast failed. Have done with thine intrigues. Where craft has failed, sheer force shall prevail. Send a rider for the Akinji; they are needed here to replace the fallen. Bid the hosts to the attack again.”

VI

The preceding onslaughts were naught to the storm that now burst on Vienna’s reeling walls. Night and day the cannons flashed and thundered. Bombs burst on roofs and in the streets. When men died on the walls there was none to take their places. Fear of famine stalked the streets and the darker fear of treachery ran black-mantled through the alleys. Investigation showed that the blast that had rent the Karnthner wall had not been fired from without. In a mine tunnelled from an unsuspected cellar inside the city, a heavy charge of powder had been exploded beneath the wall. One or two men, working secretly, might have done it. It was now apparent that the bombardment of the Burg had been merely a gesture to draw attention away from the Karnthner wall, to give the traitors an opportunity to work undiscovered.

Count Salm and his aides did the work of giants. The aged commander, fired with superhuman energy, trod the walls, braced the faltering, aided the wounded, fought in the breaches side by side with the common soldiers, while death dealt his blows unsparingly.

But if death supped within the walls, he feasted full without. Suleyman drove his men as relentlessly as if he were their worst foe. Plague stalked among them, and the ravaged countryside yielded no food. The cold winds howled down from the Carpathians and the warriors shivered in their light Oriental garb. In the frosty nights the hands of the sentries froze to their matchlocks. The ground grew hard as flint and the sappers toiled feebly with blunted tools. Rain fell, mingled with sleet, extinguishing matches, wetting powder, turning the plain outside the city to a muddy wallow, where rotting corpses sickened the living.

Suleyman shuddered as with an ague, as he looked out over the camp. He saw his warriors, worn and haggard, toiling in the muddy plain like ghosts under the gloomy leaden skies. The stench of his slaughtered thousands was in his nostrils. In that instant it seemed to the Sultan that he looked on a gray plain of the dead, where corpses dragged their lifeless bodies to an outworn task, animated only by the ruthless will of their master. For an instant the Tatar in his veins rose above the Turk and he shook with fear. Then his lean jaws set. The walls of Vienna staggered drunkenly, patched and repaired in a score of places. How could they stand?

“Sound for the onslaught. Thirty thousand aspers to the first man on the walls!”

The Grand Vizier spread his hands helplessly. “The spirit is gone out of the warriors. They can not endure the miseries of this icy land.”

“Drive them to the walls with whips,” answered Suleyman, grimly. “This is the gate to Frankistan. It is through it we must ride the road to empire.”

Drums thundered through the camp. The weary defenders of Christendom rose up and gripped their weapons, electrified by the instinctive knowledge that the death-grip had come.

In the teeth of roaring matchlocks and swinging broadswords, the officers of the Sultan drove the Moslem hosts. Whips cracked and men cried out blasphemously up and down the lines. Maddened, they hurled themselves at the reeling walls, riddled with great breaches, yet still barriers behind which desperate men could crouch. Charge after charge rolled on over the choked fosse, broke on the staggering walls, and rolled back, leaving its wash of dead. Night fell unheeded, and through the darkness, lighted by blaze of cannon and flare of torches, the battle raged. Driven by Suleyman’s terrible will, the attackers fought throughout the night, heedless of all Moslem tradition.

Dawn rose as on Armageddon. Before the walls of Vienna lay a vast carpet of steel-clad dead. Their plumes waved in the wind. And across the corpses staggered the hollow-eyed attackers to grapple with the dazed defenders.

The steel tides rolled and broke, and rolled on again, till the very gods must have stood aghast at the giant capacity of men for suffering and enduring. It was the Armageddon of races – Asia against Europe. About the walls raved a sea of Eastern faces – Turks, Tatars, Kurds, Arabs, Algerians, snarling, screaming, dying before the roaring matchlocks of the Spaniards, the thrust of Austrian pikes, the strokes of the German Lanzknechts, who swung their two-handed swords like reapers mowing ripe grain. Those within the walls were no more heroic than those without, stumbling among fields of their own dead.

To Gottfried von Kalmbach, life had faded to a single meaning – the swinging of his great sword. In the wide breach by the Karnthner Tower he fought until time lost all meaning. For long ages maddened faces rose snarling before him, the faces of devils, and scimitars flashed before his eyes everlastingly. He did not feel his wounds, nor the drain of weariness.

Gasping in the choking dust, blind with sweat and blood, he dealt death like a harvest, dimly aware that at his side a slim pantherish figure swayed and smote – at first with laughter, curses and snatches of song, later in grim silence.

His identity as an individual was lost in that cataclysm of swords. He hardly knew it when Count Salm was death-stricken at his side by a bursting bomb. He was not aware when night crept over the hills, nor did he realize at last that the tide was slackening and ebbing. He was only dimly aware that Nikolas Zrinyi tore him away from the corpse-choked breach, saying, “God’s name, man, go and sleep. We’ve beaten them off – for the time being, at least.”

He found himself in a narrow, winding street, all dark and forsaken. He had no idea of how he had got there, but seemed vaguely to remember a hand on his elbow, tugging, guiding. The weight of his mail pulled at his sagging shoulders. He could not tell if the sound he heard were the cannon fitfully roaring, or a throbbing in his own head. It seemed there was someone he should look for – someone who meant a great deal to him. But all was vague. Somewhere, sometime, it seemed long, long ago, a sword-stroke had cleft his basinet. When he tried to think he seemed to feel again the impact of that terrible blow, and his brain swam. He tore off the dented head-piece and cast it into the street.

Again the hand was tugging at his arm. A voice urged, “Wine, my lord – drink!”

Dimly he saw a lean, black-mailed figure extending a tankard. With a gasp he caught at it and thrust his muzzle into the stinging liquor, gulping like a man dying of thirst. Then something burst in his brain. The night filled with a million flashing sparks, as if a powder magazine had exploded in his head. After that, darkness and oblivion.

He came slowly to himself, aware of a raging thirst, an aching head, and an intense weariness that seemed to paralyze his limbs. He was bound hand and foot, and gagged. Twisting his head, he saw that he was in a small bare dusty room, from which a winding stone stair led up. He deduced that he was in the lower part of the tower.

Over a guttering candle on a crude table stooped two men. They were both lean and hook-nosed, clad in plain black garments – Asiatics, past

doubt. Gottfried listened to their low-toned conversation. He had picked up many languages in his wanderings. He recognized them – Tshoruk and his son Rhupen, Armenian merchants. He remembered that he had seen Tshoruk often in the last week or so, ever since the domed helmets of the Akinji had appeared in Suleyman's camp. Evidently the merchant had been shadowing him, for some reason. Tshoruk was reading what he had written on a bit of parchment.

"My lord, though I blew up the Karnthner wall in vain, yet I have news to make my lord's heart glad. My son and I have taken the German, von Kalmbach. As he left the wall, dazed with fighting, we followed, guiding him subtly to the ruined tower whereof you know, and giving him drugged wine, bound him fast. Let my lord send the emir Mikhal Oglu to the wall by the tower, and we will give him into thy hands. We will bind him on the old mangonel and cast him over the wall like a tree trunk."

The Armenian took up an arrow and began to bind the parchment about the shaft with light silver wire.

"Take this to the roof, and shoot it toward the mantlet, as usual," he began, when Rhupen exclaimed, "Hark!" and both froze, their eyes glittering like those of trapped vermin – fearful yet vindictive.

Gottfried gnawed at the gag; it slipped. Outside he heard a familiar voice. "Gottfried! Where the devil are you?"

His breath burst from him in a stentorian roar. "Hey, Sonya! Name of the devil! Be careful, girl – "

Tshoruk snarled like a wolf and struck him savagely on the head with a scimitar hilt. Almost instantly, it seemed, the door crashed inward. As in a dream Gottfried saw Red Sonya framed in the doorway, pistol in hand. Her face was drawn and haggard; her eyes burned like coals. Her basinet was gone, and her scarlet cloak. Her mail was hacked and red-clotted, her boots slashed, her silken breeches splashed and spotted with blood.

With a croaking cry Tshoruk ran at her, scimitar lifted. Before he could strike, she crashed down the barrel of the empty pistol on his head, felling him like an ox. From the other side Rhupen slashed at her with a curved Turkish dagger. Dropping the pistol, she closed with the young Oriental. Moving like someone in a dream, she bore him irresistibly backward, one hand gripping his wrist, the other his throat. Throttling him slowly, she inexorably crashed his head again and again against the stones of the wall,

until his eyes rolled up and set. Then she threw him from her like a sack of loose salt.

"God!" she muttered thickly, reeling an instant in the center of the room, her hands to her head. Then she went to the captive and sinking stiffly to her knees, cut his bonds with fumbling strokes that sliced his flesh as well as the cords.

"How did you find me?" he asked stupidly, clambering stiffly up.

She reeled to the table and sank down in a chair. A flagon of wine stood at her elbow and she seized it avidly and drank. Then she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and surveyed him wearily but with renewed life.

"I saw you leave the wall and followed. I was so drunk from the fighting I scarce knew what I did. I saw those dogs take your arm and lead you into the alleys, and then I lost sight of you. But I found your burganet lying outside in the street, and began shouting for you. What the hell's the meaning of this?"

She picked up the arrow, and blinked at the parchment fastened to it. Evidently she could read the Turkish characters, but she scanned it half a dozen times before the meaning became apparent to her exhaustion-numbed brain. Then her eyes flickered dangerously to the men on the floor. Tshoruk sat up, dazedly feeling the gash in his scalp; Rhupen lay retching and gurgling on the floor.

"Tie them up, brother," she ordered, and Gottfried obeyed. The victims eyed the woman much more apprehensively than him.

"This missive is addressed to Ibrahim, the Wezir," she said abruptly. "Why does he want Gottfried's head?"

"Because of a wound he gave the Sultan at Mohacz," muttered Tshoruk uneasily.

"And you, you lower-than-a-dog," she smiled mirthlessly, "you fired the mine by the Karnthner! You and your spawn are the traitors among us." She drew and primed a pistol. "When Zrinyi learns of you," she said, "your end will be neither quick nor sweet. But first, you old swine, I'm going to give myself the pleasure of blowing out your cub's brains before your eyes – "

The older Armenian gave a choking cry. "God of my fathers, have mercy! Kill me – torture me – but spare my son!"

At that instant a new sound split the unnatural quiet – a great peal of bells shattered the air.

"What's this?" roared Gottfried, groping wildly at his empty scabbard.

“The bells of Saint Stephen!” cried Sonya. “They peal for victory!”

She sprang for the sagging stair and he followed her up the perilous way. They came out on a sagging shattered roof, on a firmer part of which stood an ancient stone-casting machine, relic of an earlier age, and evidently recently repaired. The tower overlooked an angle of the wall, at which there were no watchers. A section of the ancient glacis, and a ditch interior to the main moat, coupled with a steep natural pitch of the earth beyond, made the point practically invulnerable. The spies had been able to exchange messages here with little fear of discovery, and it was easy to guess the method used. Down the slope, just within long arrow-shot, stood up a huge mantlet of bullhide stretched on a wooden frame, as if abandoned there by chance. Gottfried knew that message-laden arrows were loosed from the tower roof into this mantlet. But just then he gave little thought to that. His attention was riveted on the Turkish camp. There a leaping glare paled the spreading dawn; above the mad clangor of the bells rose the crackle of flames, mingled with awful screams.

“The Janizaries are burning their prisoners,” said Red Sonya.

“Judgment Day in the morning,” muttered Gottfried, awed at the sight that met his eyes.

From their eyrie the companions could see almost all the plain. Under a cold gray leaden sky, tinged a somber crimson with dawn, it lay strewn with Turkish corpses as far as sight carried. And the hosts of the living were melting away. From Semmering the great pavilion had vanished. The other tents were coming down swiftly. Already the head of the long column was out of sight, moving into the hills through the cold dawn. Snow began falling in light swift flakes.

The Janizaries were glutting their mad disappointment on their helpless captives, hurling men, women and children living into the flames they had kindled under the somber eyes of their master, the monarch men called the

Magnificent, the Merciful. All the time the bells of Vienna clanged and thundered as if their bronze throats would burst.

“They shot their bolt last night,” said Red Sonya. “I saw their officers lashing them, and heard them cry out in fear beneath our swords. Flesh and blood could stand no more. Look!” She clutched her companion’s arm. “The Akinji will form the rear-guard.”

Even at that distance they made out a pair of vulture wings moving among the dark masses; the sullen light glimmered on a jeweled helmet. Sonya’s powder-stained hands clenched so that the pink, broken nails bit into the white palms, and she spat out a Cossack curse that burned like vitriol.

“There he goes, the bastard, that made Austria a desert! How easily the souls of the butchered folk ride on his cursed winged shoulders! Anyway, old warhorse, he didn’t get your head.”

“While he lives it’ll ride loose on my shoulders,” rumbled the giant.

Red Sonya’s keen eyes narrowed suddenly. Seizing Gottfried’s arm, she hurried downstairs. They did not see Nikolas Zrinyi and Paul Bakics ride out of the gates with their tattered retainers, risking their lives in sorties to rescue prisoners. Steel clashed along the line of march, and the Akinji retreated slowly, fighting a good rear-guard action, balking the headlong courage of the attackers by their very numbers. Safe in the depths of his horsemen, Mikhal Oglu grinned sardonically. But Suleyman, riding in the main column, did not grin. His face was like a death-mask.

Back in the ruined tower, Red Sonya propped one booted foot on a chair, and cupping her chin in her hand, stared into the fear-dulled eyes of Tshoruk.

“What will you give for your life?”

The Armenian made no reply.

“What will you give for the life of your whelp?”

The Armenian stared as if stung. “Spare my son, princess,” he groaned. “Anything – I will pay – I will do anything.”

She threw a shapely booted leg across the chair and sat down.

“I want you to bear a message to a man.”

“What man?”

“Mikhal Oglu.”

He shuddered and moistened his lips with his tongue.

“Instruct me; I obey,” he whispered.

“Good. We’ll free you and give you a horse. Your son shall remain here as hostage. If you fail us, I’ll give the cub to the Viennese to play with – ”

Again the old Armenian shuddered.

“But if you play squarely, we’ll let you both go free, and my pal and I will forget about this treachery. I want you to ride after Mikhal Oglu and tell him – ”

Through the slush and driving snow, the Turkish column plodded slowly. Horses bent their heads to the blast; up and down the straggling lines camels groaned and complained, and oxen bellowed pitifully. Men stumbled through the mud, leaning beneath the weight of their arms and equipment. Night was falling, but no command had been given to halt. All day the retreating host had been harried by the daring Austrian cuirassiers who darted down upon them like wasps, tearing captives from their very hands.

Grimly rode Suleyman among his Solaks. He wished to put as much distance as possible between himself and the scene of his first defeat, where the rotting bodies of thirty thousand Muhammadans reminded him of his crushed ambitions. Lord of western Asia he was; master of Europe he could never be. Those despised walls had saved the Western world from Moslem dominion, and Suleyman knew it. The rolling thunder of the Ottoman power re-echoed around the world, paling the glories of Persia and Mogul India. But in the West the yellow-haired Aryan barbarian stood unshaken. It was not written that the Turk should rule beyond the Danube.

Suleyman had seen this written in blood and fire, as he stood on Semmering and saw his warriors fall back from the ramparts, despite the flailing lashes of their officers. It had been to save his authority that he gave the order to break camp – it burned his tongue like gall, but already his soldiers were burning their tents and preparing to desert him. Now in darkly brooding silence he rode, not even speaking to Ibrahim.

In his own way Mikhal Oglu shared their savage despondency. It was with a ferocious reluctance that he turned his back on the land he had ruined, as a half-glutted panther might be driven from its prey. He recalled with satisfaction the blackened, corpse-littered wastes – the screams of tortured men – the cries of girls writhing in his iron arms; recalled with

much the same sensations the death-shrieks of those same girls in the blood-fouled hands of his killers.

But he was stung with the disappointment of a task undone – for which the Grand Vizier had lashed him with stinging words. He was out of favor with Ibrahim. For a lesser man that might have meant a bowstring. For him it meant that he would have to perform some prodigious feat to reinstate himself. In this mood he was dangerous and reckless as a wounded panther.

Snow fell heavily, adding to the miseries of the retreat. Wounded men fell in the mire and lay still, covered by a growing white mantle. Mikhal Oglu rode among his rearmost ranks, straining his eyes into the darkness. No foe had been sighted for hours. The victorious Austrians had ridden back to their city.

The columns were moving slowly through a ruined village, whose charred beams and crumbling fire-seared walls stood blackly in the falling snow. Word came back down the lines that the Sultan would pass on through and camp in a valley which lay a few miles beyond.

The quick drum of hoofs back along the way they had come caused the Akinji to grip their lances and glare slit-eyed into the flickering darkness. They heard but a single horse, and a voice calling the name of Mikhal Oglu. With a word the chief stayed a dozen lifted bows, and shouted in return. A tall gray stallion loomed out of the flying snow, a black-mantled figure crouched grotesquely atop of it.

“Tshoruk! You Armenian dog! What in the name of Allah – ”

The Armenian rode close to Mikhal Oglu and whispered urgently in his ear. The cold bit through the thickest garments. The Akinji noted that Tshoruk was trembling violently. His teeth chattered and he stammered in his speech. But the Turk’s eyes blazed at the import of his message.

“Dog, do you lie?”

“May I rot in hell if I lie!” A strong shudder shook Tshoruk and he drew his kaftan close about him. “He fell from his horse, riding with the cuirassiers to attack the rear-guard, and lies with a broken leg in a deserted peasant’s hut, some three miles back – alone except for his mistress Red Sonya, and three or four Lanzknechts, who are drunk on wine they found in the deserted camp.”

Mikhal Oglu wheeled his horse with sudden intent.

“Twenty men to me!” he barked. “The rest ride on with the main column. I go after a head worth its weight in gold. I’ll overtake you before you go

into camp.”

Othman caught his jeweled rein. “Are you mad, to ride back now? The whole country will be on our heels – ”

He reeled in his saddle as Mikhal Oglu slashed him across the mouth with his riding-whip. The chief wheeled away, followed by the men he had designated. Like ghosts they vanished into the spectral darkness.

Othman sat his horse uncertainly, looking after them. The snow shafted down, the wind sobbed drearily among the bare branches. There was no sound except the receding noises of the trudging column. Presently these ceased. Then Othman started. Back along the way they had come, he heard a distant reverberation, a roar as of forty or fifty matchlocks speaking together. In the utter silence which followed, panic came upon Othman and his warriors. Whirling away they fled through the ruined village after the retreating horde.

VII

None noticed when night fell on Constantinople, for the splendor of Suleyman made night no less glorious than day. Through gardens that were riots of blossoms and perfume, cressets twinkled like myriad fireflies. Fireworks turned the city into a realm of shimmering magic, above which the minarets of five hundred mosques rose like towers of fire in an ocean of golden foam. Tribesmen on Asian hills gaped and marvelled at the blaze that pulsed and glowed afar, paling the very stars. The streets of Stamboul were thronged with crowds in the attire of holiday and rejoicing. The million lights shone on jeweled turban and striped khalat – on dark eyes sparkling over filmy veils – on shining palanquins borne on the shoulders of huge ebony-skinned slaves.

All that splendor centered in the Hippodrome, where in lavish pageants the horsemen of Turkistan and Tatary competed in breath-taking races with the riders of Egypt and Arabia, where warriors in glittering mail spilled one another's blood on the sands, where swordsmen were matched against wild beasts, and lions were pitted against tigers from Bengal and boars from northern forests. One might have deemed the imperial pageantry of Rome revived in Eastern garb.

On a golden throne, set upon lapis lazuli pillars, Suleyman reclined, gazing on the splendors, as purple-togaed Caesars had gazed before him. About him bowed his viziers and officers, and the ambassadors from foreign courts – Venice, Persia, India, the khanates of Tatary. They came – including the Venetians – to congratulate him on his victory over the Austrians. For this grand fete was in celebration of that victory, as set forth in a manifesto under the Sultan's hand, which stated, in part, that the Austrians having made submission and sued for pardon on their knees, and the German realms being so distant from the Ottoman empire, "the Faithful would not trouble to clean out the fortress (Vienna), or purify, improve, and put it in repair." Therefore the Sultan had accepted the submission of the contemptible Germans, and left them in possession of their paltry "fortress"!

Suleyman was blinding the eyes of the world with the blaze of his wealth and glory, and striving to make himself believe that he had actually accomplished all he had intended. He had not been beaten on the field of

open battle; he had set his puppet on the Hungarian throne; he had devastated Austria; the markets of Stamboul and Asia were full of Christian slaves. With this knowledge he soothed his vanity, ignoring the fact that thirty thousand of his subjects rotted before Vienna, and that his dreams of European conquest had been shattered.

Behind the throne shone the spoils of war – silken and velvet pavilions, wrested from the Persians, the Arabs, the Egyptian memluks; costly tapestries, heavy with gold embroidery. At his feet were heaped the gifts and tributes of subject and allied princes. There were vests of Venetian velvet, golden goblets crusted with jewels from the courts of the Grand Moghul, ermine-lined kaftans from Erzeroum, carven jade from Cathay, silver Persian helmets with horse-hair plumes, turban-cloths, cunningly sewn with gems, from Egypt, curved Damascus blades of watered steel, matchlocks from Kabul worked richly in chased silver, breastplates and shields of Indian steel, rare furs from Mongolia. The throne was flanked on either hand by a long rank of youthful slaves, made fast by golden collars to a single, long silver chain. One file was composed of young Greek and Hungarian boys, the other of girls; all clad only in plumed head-pieces and jeweled ornaments intended to emphasize their nudity.

Eunuchs in flowing robes, their rotund bellies banded by cloth-of-gold sashes, knelt and offered the royal guests sherbets in gemmed goblets, cooled with snow from the mountains of Asia Minor. The torches danced and flickered to the roars of the multitudes. Around the courses swept the horses, foam flying from their bits; wooden castles reeled and went up in flames as the Janizaries clashed in mock warfare. Officers passed among the shouting people, tossing showers of copper and silver coins amongst them. None hungered or thirsted in Stamboul that night except the miserable Caphar captives. The minds of the foreign envoys were numbed by the bursting sea of splendor, the thunder of imperial magnificence. About the vast arena stalked trained elephants, almost covered with housings of gold-worked leather, and from the jeweled towers on their backs, fanfares of trumpets vied with the roar of the throngs and the bellowing of lions. The tiers of the Hippodrome were a sea of faces, all turning toward the jeweled figure on the shining throne, while thousands of tongues wildly thundered his acclaim.

As he impressed the Venetian envoys, Suleyman knew he impressed the world. In the blaze of his magnificence, men would forget that a handful of

desperate Caphars behind rotting walls had closed his road to empire. Suleyman accepted a goblet of the forbidden wine, and spoke aside to the Grand Vizier, who stepped forth and lifted his arms.

"Oh, guests of my master, the Padishah forgets not the humblest in the hour of rejoicing. To the officers who led his hosts against the infidels, he has made rare gifts. Now he gives two hundred and forty thousand ducats to be distributed among the common soldiers, and likewise to each Janizary he gives a thousand aspers."

In the midst of the roar that went up, a eunuch knelt before the Grand Vizier, holding up a large round package, carefully bound and sealed. A folded piece of parchment, held shut by a red seal, accompanied it. The attention of the Sultan was attracted.

"Oh, friend, what has thou there?"

Ibrahim salaamed. "The rider of the Adrianople post delivered it, oh Lion of Islam. Apparently it is a gift of some sort from the Austrian dogs. Infidel riders, I understand, gave it into the hands of the border guard, with instructions to send it straightway to Stamboul."

"Open it," directed Suleyman, his interest roused. The eunuch salaamed to the floor, then began breaking the seals of the package. A scholarly slave opened the accompanying note and read the contents, written in a bold yet feminine hand:

> To the Soldan Suleyman and his Wezir Ibrahim and to the hussy Roxelana we who sign our names below send a gift in token of our immeasurable fondness and kind affection.
>
> *Sonya of Rogatino, and Gottfried von Kalmbach*

Suleyman, who had started up at the name of his favorite, his features suddenly darkening with wrath, gave a choking cry, which was echoed by Ibrahim. The eunuch had torn the seals of the bale, disclosing what lay within. A pungent scent of herbs and preservative spices filled the air, and the object, slipping from the horrified eunuch's hands, tumbled among the heaps of presents at Suleyman's feet, offering a ghastly contrast to the gems, gold and velvet bales. The Sultan stared down at it and in that instant his shimmering pretense of triumph slipped from him; his glory turned to

tinsel and dust. Ibrahim tore at his beard with a gurgling, strangling sound, purple with rage.

At the Sultan’s feet, the features frozen in a death-mask of horror, lay the severed head of Mikhal Oglu, Vulture of the Grand Turk.

The Road of the Eagles

I

Though the cannon had ceased to speak, their thunder seemed still to echo hauntingly among the hills that overhung the blue water. A league from the shore the loser of that grim sea-fight wallowed in the crimson wash; just out of cannon-shot the winner limped slowly away. It was a scene common enough on the Black Sea in the year of our Lord 1595.

The ship that heeled drunkenly in the blue waste was a high beaked galley such as was used by the dread Barbary corsairs. Death had reaped a grim harvest there. Dead men sprawled on the high poop; they hung loosely over the scarred rail; they lay among the ruins of the aftercastle; they slumped along the runway that bridged the waist, where the mangled oarsmen lay among their shattered benches. Even in death these had not the appearance of men born to slavery – they were tall men, with dark hawk-like countenances. In pens about the base of the mast, fear-maddened horses fought and screamed unbearably.

Clustered on the splintered poop stood the survivors – twenty men, many of them dripping blood from wounds. The reek of burnt powder and fresh blood hung over the ship like a pall. The men were a strange picturesque band – tall and lean, most of them, as men become who spend their lives in the saddle. Indeed, they seemed not entirely at home on the water. They were burnt dark by the sun; beardless, their moustaches drooped below their chins; their heads were shaven except for a long scalp-lock on the ridge of the skull. They were clad in boots and baggy breeches of leather, nankeen or silk; some wore *kalpaks*, lambskin caps, others steel caps, while many had no head-wear. Some wore shirts of chain-mail, others were naked to their sash-girt waists, their muscular arms and broad shoulders burnt almost black. Naked blades were in their hands – Turkish scimitars and long Hungarian sabers. Their dark eyes were restless; there was something of the eagle about them all – something wild and untamable, from the fundamental tie-ribs of Life.

They were standing about a man who lay dying on the poop. This man’s drooping moustache was shot with grey. His face was twisted with old scars. His *svitka* was thrown back, his shirt dyed by the blood that welled from a sword-cut in his side.

“Where is Ivan – Ivan Sablianka?” he muttered.

“Here he is, *asavul*,” came the chorus as a big warrior strode forward.

“Yes, here I am, uncle,” the big man twisted his moustache uncertainly. He was the tallest man there and heavily built. Clad like the others, he differed from them strangely. His wide eyes were blue as the waters of a deep sea, his scalp-lock and flowing moustache the color of spun gold. He had lost his helmet, and in his huge fist he gripped the great weapon that gave him his name – *sablianka* – little sword.

He bent lower to hear the words of the dying *asavul*.

“He has escaped us, sir brothers,” whispered this one. “Does any of the *sotniks* – the captains – live?”

“Nay, little uncle,” answered a lean dark warrior who was binding a rude bandage about a gashed forearm. “Tashko swallowed a bullet the wrong way, and – ”

“Nay, I saw the others die,” murmured the older man. “I am the only officer among you, and I am dying. Ivan – *kunaks* – brothers – your task is not yet done. I can not go on with you, but you must not falter. When we stood about the mangled body of Skol Ostap, our *Ataman*, on the banks of Father Dnieper, we all swore by our Cossack honor that we would not rest until we brought back to the *Sjetsch* the head of the devil who slew him and our comrades. Now after we’ve followed him clear across the Black Sea in the galley we took from him, he’s beaten us off and staggers away; nay, he can not ride far on a horse we foundered with cannon balls. He’ll run in to shore. You have horses – follow! To Stamboul or to hell if you must! Ivan, you are *essaul* – sergeant – now. Follow! Die or take the head of Osman Pasha – who – slew – Skol – Ostap – ”

The shaven head dropped on the scarred breast. The Cossacks shifted and murmured in their moustaches. They looked expectantly at Ivan Sablianka. He gnawed his moustache reflectively, glanced at the lateen sail drooping in the windless air, and stared at the shoreline. Besides that of their foe, no other sail was visible on the sea, no harbor or town on that wild lonely coast. Low, tree-covered hills rose from the waterline, climbing swiftly to blue mountains in the distance, on whose snow-tipped peaks the sinking sun flamed red. There was a reason why Ivan should know more about seas and ships than his comrades, but he had no exact idea as to where they were. They had crossed the Black Sea; therefore they were now in Moslem territory; these hills were doubtless full of Turks – in his mind he lumped all Muhammadan races under a single contemptuous term.

Under a broad shading hand he stared at the slowly receding craft – a counterpart to that on which he stood. Its crew had been glad enough to break away from the death-grapple. Ivan knew that it was crippled beyond repair, though in better shape than the hulk which was sinking under his feet. The corsair was making for a creek which wound out of the hills between high cliffs. She moved slowly, heeling to port, but Ivan believed she would make it. On the poop he could still make out a figure which caused him to rumble in his throat – a tall figure, on whose mail and helmet the sinking sun sparkled. Ivan remembered the features under that helmet, glimpsed in the chaotic frenzy of battle – hawk-nosed, grey-eyed, black-bearded – stirring in the Cossack an illusive sensation of semi-recollection. That was Osman Pasha, until recently the scourge of the Levant, most renowned of all the Algerian corsairs.

Ivan studied the shoreline. He could not follow to the creek-mouth, but he believed he could run the galley ashore on a sloping headland that ran out from the hills nearer at hand. He went to one of the steering-sweeps.

“Togrukh and Yermak take the other,” he directed; “Demetri and Konstantine quiet the horses. The rest of you dog-brothers tie up your cuts and then go down into the waist and do the best you can at rowing. If any of those Algerian pigs are still alive, knock ’em on the head.”

There were not. Those the cannon balls of their former comrades had spared had been mowed down by the pistols and swords of the Cossacks as they broke their chains and strove to swarm up out of the waist.

Slowly and laboriously they worked the galley inshore. The sun was setting, the long shadows of the cliffs turning from dark blue to velvety purple. A haze like soft blue smoke hovered over the dark water that sunset turned to dusky amethyst. A few stars blinked out in the east. The corsair galley had limped into the mouth of the creek, vanishing between the towering cliffs.

Ivan and his comrades worked stolidly. The starboard rail was almost awash, and the Cossacks abandoned the oars and came up on the poop. The horses were screaming again, mad with fear at the rising water. The Cossacks looked at the shore, teeming, for all they knew, with hostile tribes, but they said nothing. They followed Ivan’s directions as implicitly as if he had been elected *ataman* by regular conclave in the *Sjetsch*, that stronghold of free men on the lower reaches of the Dnieper.

It was the only real democracy that ever existed on earth; a democracy where there was no class distinction save that of personal prowess and courage. To the Saporoska *Sjetsch* came men of all lands and races, leaving their pasts behind, to merge into the new race that was there being evolved. They took new names, entered into new lives. None asked their real names, nor whence they came. They were of many bloods. Togrukh, for example, was the son of a renegade Hungarian colonel and a Tatar slave-woman.

Whence Ivan came, none knew or cared. He had wandered into the *Sjetsch* five years before, speaking brokenly the speech of the Muscovites. He had aroused some suspicion at the beginning. He affirmed that he believed in God – which was one of the few questions asked an applicant to the *Sjetsch* – but he was reluctant to cross himself. After argument he compromised by cutting a cross in the air with his sword. He was narrowly watched for some time, but soon proved his honesty in battles against the Turks, and the Tatars of Crimea. Whatever his former life and tongue, he was all Cossack now. He might have been born and raised on the southern steppes.

His sword was one departure from form, among men where curved blades were almost universally the rule. It was straight, four and a half feet in length from point to pommel, broad, double-edged, a blade for thrusting as well as hacking. Not much inferior in weight to the five-foot two-handed swords used by the Wallachian and German men-at-arms, it was meant to be wielded with one hand. From the wide cross-piece to the heavy silver ball that was the pommel, curved a broad hand-guard in flaring lines of gilt-chased iron. Not half a dozen men on the frontier could wield that sword with one hand. It was in Ivan’s fingers now as he leaned on the useless sweep and stared at the headland which loomed nearer and nearer with each heave and roll of the floundering galley.

II

In the fertile valley of Ekrem happenings were coming to pass. The river that wound through the small patches of meadowland and farmland was tinged red, and the mountains that rose on either hand looked down on a scene only less old than they. Horror had come upon the peaceful valley-dwellers, in the shape of lean wolfish riders from the outlands. They did not turn their gaze toward the castle that hung as if poised on the sheer slope high up the mountains; there too lurked oppressors.

The clan of Ilbars Khan, the Turkoman, driven westward out of Persia by tribal feud, was taking toll among the Armenian villages in the valley of Ekrem. It was but a raid among raids, for cattle, slaves and plunder, meant to impress his lordship over the *caphar* dogs. He was ambitious; his dreams embraced more than the leadership of a wandering tribe. Chiefs had carved kingdoms out of these hills before.

But just now, like his warriors, he was drunk with slaughter. The huts of the Armenians lay in smoking ruins. The barns had been spared, because they contained fodder for horses, as well as the ricks. Up and down the valley the lean riders raced, stabbing and loosing their arrows. Men screamed as the steel drove home; women shrieked as they were jerked naked across the raiders' saddle-bows.

The horsemen in their sheepskins and high fur *kalpaks* were swarming in the straggling streets of the largest village – a squalid cluster of huts, half mud, half stone. Routed out of their pitiful hiding-places, the villagers knelt vainly imploring mercy, or as vainly fled, to be ridden down as they ran.

Foremost in this sport was Ilbars Khan, and lost the chance of a kingdom thereby. He spurred between the huts, out into the meadow, chasing a ragged wretch whose heels were winged by the fear of death. Ilbars Khan's lance-point caught him between the shoulder-blades. The spear-shaft snapped and the drumming hoofs spurned the writhing body as the chief swept past.

"Allah il allah!" Beards were whitened with foam at the blood-mad cry.

The *yataghans* whistled, ending in the *zhukk!* of cloven flesh and bone. With a wild cry a fugitive turned as Ilbars Khan swooped down on him, his wide *kaftan* spreading out in the wind like the wings of a hawk. In that instant the dilated eyes of the Armenian saw, as in a dream, the lean bearded

face with its thin down-curving nose; the gold-broidered vest beneath the flowing cloak, crossed by the wide silk girdle from which projected the ivory hilts of half a dozen daggers; the wide sleeve falling away from the lean muscular arm that lifted, ending in a broad curving glitter of steel. In that instant too, the Turkoman saw the lean stooped figure tensed beneath the rags, the wild eyes glaring from under the lank tangle of hair, the long glimmer of light glancing along the barrel of a musket. A wild cry rang from the lips of the hunted, drowned in the bursting roar of the firelock. A swirling cloud of smoke enveloped the figures, in which a flashing ray of steel cut the murk like a flicker of lightning. Out of the cloud raced a riderless steed, reins flowing free. A breath of wind blew the smoke away.

One of the figures on the ground was still writhing; slowly it drew itself up on one elbow. It was the Armenian, life welling fast from a ghastly cut across the neck and shoulder. Gasping, fighting hard for life, he looked down with wildly glaring eyes on the other form. The Turkoman's *kalpak* lay yards away, blown there by the close-range shot; most of his brains were in it. Ilbars Khan's beard jutted upward, as if in ghastly comic surprize. The Armenian's arm gave way and his face crashed into the dirt, filling his mouth with dust. He spat it out, dyed red. A ghastly laugh slobbered from his frothy lips. It rose to a shout that scared the wheeling vultures. He fell back threshing the sand with his hands, yelling with maniacal mirth. When the horrified Turkomans reached the spot, the Armenian was dead with a ghastly smile frozen on his lips. He had recognized his victim.

The Turkomans squatted about like evil-eyed vultures about a dead sheep, and conversed over the body of their khan. Their speech was evil as their countenances, and when they rose from that buzzards' conclave, the doom had been sealed of every Armenian in the valley of Ekrem.

Granaries, ricks and stables, spared by Ilbars Khan, went up in flames. All the prisoners taken were slain – infants tossed living into the flames, young girls ripped up and flung into the blood-stained streets. Beside the khan's corpse grew a heap of severed heads; the riders galloped up, swinging the ghastly relics by the hair, tossing them on the grim pyramid. Every place that might conceivably lend concealment to a shuddering wretch was ripped apart.

It was while engaged in this that one of the tribesmen, prodding into a stack of hay, discerned a movement in the straw. With a wolfish yell he

pounced upon it, and dragged his victim to light, giving tongue in lustful exultation as he saw his prisoner. It was a girl, and no stodgy Armenian woman, either. Tearing off the cloak which she sought to huddle about her slender form, he feasted his vulture-eyes on her beauty, scantily covered by the garb of a Persian dancing-girl. Over her filmy *yasmaq* – her light veil – her dark eyes, shadowed by long *kohl*-tinted lashes, were eloquent with fear.

She said nothing, struggling fiercely, her lithe limbs writhing in his cruel grip. He dragged her toward his horse – then quick and deadly as a striking cobra, she snatched a curved dagger from his girdle and sank it to the hilt under his heart. With a groan he crumpled, his sheepskins dyed red, and she sprang like a she-panther to his horse, seeming to soar to the high-peaked saddle, so lithe were her motions. The tall steed neighed and reared, and she wrenched it about and raced up the valley. Behind her the pack gave tongue and streamed out in hot pursuit. Arrows whistled about her head and she flinched as they sang venomously by, but urged the steed to more frenzied efforts.

She reined him straight at the mountain wall on the south, where a narrow canyon opened into the valley. Here the going was perilous, and the Turkomans reined to a less headlong pace among the rolling stones and broken boulders. But the girl rode like a leaf blown before a storm, and so it was that she was leading them by several hundred yards when she came upon a cluster of tamarisk-grown boulders that rose island-like above the level of the canyon floor. There was a spring among those boulders, and men were there.

She saw them among the rocks, and they shouted at her to halt. At first she thought them Turkomans; then she saw her mistake. They were tall and strongly built, chain-mail glinting under their cloaks. Their white turban-cloths were wrapped about steel caps that rose to a spire-like peak. Their dark faces were strong and reckless. If the Turkomans were jackals, these were hawks. All this she saw in that moment, her quick perception abnormally whetted by desperation. She saw too the muzzles of matchlocks among the rocks, and caught the flicker of burning fuses. And she made up her mind instantly. Throwing herself from the steed, she ran up the rocks, falling on her knees.

“Aid, in the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate!”

A man emerged from a clump of bushes and looked down at her. And as she looked, she cried out again incredulously.

“Osman Pasha!” Then recollecting her urgent need, she clasped his knees, crying, “*Yah khawand*, protect me! Save me from these wolves who follow!”

“Why should I risk my life for you?” he asked indifferently.

“I knew you of old in the court of the Padishah!” she cried desperately, tearing off her veil. “I danced before you. I am Ayesha – ”

“Many women have danced before me,” he answered. “I have no quarrel with these desert-dogs.”

“Then I will give you a *talsmin*,” said she in final desperation. “Listen!” And as she whispered a name in his ear, he started as if stung. Quickly he raised his head, staring at her as if to plumb the depths of her inmost mind. For an instant he stood motionless, his grey eyes turned inward, then clambering up a great boulder, he faced the oncoming riders with lifted hand.

“Go your way in peace, in the name of Allah!”

His answer was a whistle of arrows about his ears. He sprang down, waving his hand. Instantly matchlocks began to crash from among the rocks, the smoke billowing about the thicket-clad knoll. A dozen wild riders rolled from their saddles and lay twitching. The rest gave back, yelling in dismay. They wheeled about and cantered swiftly back up the gorge toward the main valley.

Osman Pasha turned to Ayesha, who had modestly resumed her veil. He was a tall man, with grey eyes like ice and steel. There was in his manner a certain ruthless directness rare in an Oriental. His cloak was of crimson silk, his corselet of close-meshed chain mail threaded with gold. His green turban was held in place by a jeweled brooch, and his spired helmet was chased in silver. Ivory butts of gold-mounted pistols jutted from his shagreen girdle, which was resplendent with a great golden buckle, and his boots were of finest Spanish leather. Salt water, powder smoke and blood had stained and tarnished his apparel; yet the richness of his garments and weapons was notable, even in that age of lavish accoutrements.

His men were gathered about him, forty Algerian pirates, as ruthless and courageous a race as ever trod a deck, bristling with firearms and scimitars. In a depression behind the knoll were horses of a rather inferior breed.

“My daughter,” said Osman Pasha in a benignant manner that was belied by his cruel eyes, “I have made enemies in this strange land, and fought a skirmish on your behalf, because of a name whispered in my ear. I believed you – ”

“If I lied may my hide be stripped from me,” she swore.

“It will be,” he promised gently. “I will see to it personally. You spoke the name of Prince Orkhan. What do you know of him?”

“For three years I have shared his exile.”

“Where is he now?”

She pointed up toward the mountains that overhung the distant valley, where the turrets of the castle were just visible among the crags.

“Across the valley, in yonder castle of El Afdal Shirkuh, the Kurd.”

“It would be hard to take,” he mused.

“Send for the rest of your sea-hawks!” she cried. “I know a way to bring you to the very heart of that keep!”

He shook his head.

“These ye see are all my band.”

Then seeing her incredulous glance, he said, “I am not surprized that you wonder at my change of fortune. I will tell you – ”

And with the disconcerting frankness of the man, which his fellow Moslems found so inexplicable, Osman Pasha briefly sketched his fall. He did not tell her of his triumphs; they were too well known to need repeating. Five years before he had appeared suddenly on the stage of the Mediterranean, as a *reis* of the famed corsair, Seyf ed-din Ghazi. He soon outstripped his master and gathered a fleet of his own, which owned allegiance to no ruler, not even the Barbary *beys*. At first an ally of the Grand Turk and a welcome guest at the Sublime Porte, he had later enraged the Sultan by his raids on Turkish shipping.

A deadly feud had arisen between them, and at last fate had declared in favor of Murad. Pillaging along the Dardanelles, the corsair had been trapped by an Ottoman fleet and all his ships destroyed except two. But the Sultan had spared his life, giving him a task that practically amounted to a death sentence. He was commanded to sail up the Black Sea to the Dnieper mouth and there destroy another foe of the Turk’s – Skol Ostap, the *Koshevoi Ataman* of the Zaporogian Cossacks, whose raids into Turkish dominions had driven the Sultan well-nigh to madness.

The Cossacks at intervals shifted their *Sjetsch* – their armed camp – from island to island, secretly, to avoid surprize attacks, but Osman's luck had been with him to a certain extent. A Greek traitor had led him to the Dnieper island then occupied by the free warriors, and at a time when many of them were away on a raid against the Tatars across the river. The flying raid had failed in capturing Skol Ostap, lying helpless of an old wound, because of the ferocious resistance of the Cossacks with him. In the midst of the battle the riders had returned from pounding the Tatars, and Osman fled, leaving one of his ships in their hands. He knew the penalty for failure, and instead of fleeing toward the Turkish fleet which waited down along the coast, he struck straight out across the Black Sea, soon pursued by the Cossacks in his captured ship, using its crew for oarsmen. He did not understand the ferocity of their pursuit, not knowing that a bursting shell from his cannon had slain the wounded Skol Ostap and maddened his *kunaks* thereby.

When the eastern coast was in sight, the reckless Cossacks had drawn up within cannon-shot, and in the ensuing battle only the rising of the oarsmen on their craft had won the day for the corsair.

"So we ran the galley ashore in the creek. We might have repaired her, but whither go? The Sultan's fleets hold the gateway out of the Black Sea, and he will have a bowstring ready for me when he knows I've failed. We found a village up along the creek – Moslems of a sort who toiled among vineyards and the fishing nets. There we procured horses and struck through the mountains, seeking we know not what – a way out of Ottoman dominions, or a new kingdom to rule. Who knows?"

They had pushed on through the mountains for days, preferring the wild desolation of uninhabited land to the risk of falling afoul of Turkish outposts. Osman Pasha had an idea that already swift couriers had carried the word throughout the empire that he was doomed. Whatever else the Turkish sultans were or were not, they were thorough in their vengeance. He had been wandering without a plan, trusting to his luck. The fatalism of the Turk was not his.

Ayesha listened, and without comment began her tale. As Osman well knew, it was the custom of the sultans, upon coming to the throne, to butcher their brothers and their brothers' children. Bayazid I began that custom, and whatever its moral aspects, it can not be denied that it saved the empire from many disastrous civil wars – each Ottoman prince

considering the throne his prerogative. Sometimes a prison took the place of the bowstring, as in the case of Prince Jem, brother of Bayazid II, who was the unwilling guest for many years, first of the Knights of St. John on Rhodes, to whom the Sultan paid 45,000 ducats a year as gaoler's fee, and later of two successive Popes, the last of whom, Alexander Borgia, considerately poisoned the unhappy prince in return for a lump sum of gold from the Sultan.

This precedent was followed later, as with Prince Orkhan, son of Selim the Drunkard, and brother of Murad III. A curious parallel might be noted here. Just as in the case of Jem and Bayazid, when the weaker brother won over the stronger by force of circumstances, so in the later case. When Selim the Drunkard passed out of his besotted life, Orkhan was in Egypt. Murad was in Skutari. In the resultant race for the capital, the result is obvious. It had long been a custom among the Turks to grant the crown to whichever heir first reached Constantinople after the death of the Sultan. The *viziers* and *beys*, dreading civil war, generally supported the first comer, who in turn bought the janizaries with rich gifts, and with their aid set about eliminating his brothers. Even with this advantage the weak Murad could never have resisted his more aggressive brother, had it not been for his *harim* favorite, Safia, a Venetian woman of the Baffo family. She was the real ruler of Turkey, and by her wiles, whereby the Venetians were drawn in to aid the Sultan, Orkhan's thrust for the throne was defeated and he went into exile.

At first he had sought refuge in the Persian court, and the Shah had promised him aid in gaining the crown. But a few brushes with the dread janizaries cooled the Persian ardor, and Orkhan discovered that the Shah was corresponding with Safia in regard to poisoning him. He made his escape, but in attempting to reach India, was taken captive by the nomadic Bashkirs, who recognized him and sold him into the hands of the Ottomans. Orkhan considered his fate sealed, but Murad dared not have him butchered, for he was still very popular with the masses, especially the subject but ever turbulent Memluks of Egypt, and the *Sipahis*, or independent land-holders of Anatolia. He was confined in a castle near Erzeroum, and furnished with all luxuries and forms of dissipation calculated to soften his fibre.

This was being gradually brought about, Ayesha said. She was one of the dancing girls sent to entertain him. She had fallen violently in love with the

handsome prince, and instead of seeking to ruin him with her passion and amorous wiles, had labored to lift him back to manhood. She had succeeded so well – though without being suspected as the prime motive force – that the prince had been hurriedly and secretly taken from Erzeroum and carried up into the wild mountains above Ekrem, there to be put in charge of El Afdal Shirkuh, a fierce semi-bandit chief, whose family had reigned as feudal lords over the valley for a generation or so, preying on the inhabitants, though not protecting them.

“There we have been for more than a year,” concluded Ayesha. “Prince Orkhan has sunk into apathy. One would not recognize him for the young eagle who led his Egyptian horsemen into the teeth of the janizaries. Imprisonment and *bhang* and wine have drugged his senses. He sits on his cushions in *kaif*, rousing only when I sing or dance for him. But he has the blood of conquerors in him. His grandfather, Suleyman the Magnificent, is reborn in him. He is a lion who but sleeps –

“When the Turkomans rode into the valley, I slipped out of the castle and came looking for their chief, Ilbars Khan, for I had heard of his prowess and ambitions. I wished to find a man bold enough to free Orkhan. Let the young eagle’s wings feel the wind again, and he will rise and shake the dust from his brain. Again he will be Orkhan the Splendid. I sought Ilbars Khan, but I saw him slain before I could reach him, and then the Turkomans were like mad dogs. I was afraid and hid, but they dragged me out.

“Oh, my lord, aid us! What if you have no ship and only a handful at your back? Kingdoms have been built on less! When it is known that the prince is free – and thou art with him! – men will flock to us! The feudal lords, the Timariotes, they supported him before, and will not turn from him now. Nay, had they known the place of his confinement, they had torn yon keep stone from stone already! The Sultan is besotted. The people hate Safia and her mongrel son Muhammad.

“The nearest Turkish post is three days’ ride from this place. The valley of Ekrem is isolated – unknown to most except wandering Kurds and the wretched Armenians. Here an empire can be plotted unmolested. You, too, are an outlaw. Let us band together. We will free Orkhan – place him on his rightful throne! If Orkhan were Padishah, all wealth and power and honor were yours; Murad offers you naught but a bowstring!”

She was on her knees before him, her white fingers convulsively gripping his cloak, her veil torn aside again, her dark eyes blazing with the passion of her plea. Osman Pasha was silent, but cold lights glimmered in his steely eyes. He knew that what the girl said of Orkhan’s popularity was true; nor did he underrate his own power. King-maker! It was such a role as he had dreamed of. And this desperate adventure, with death or a throne for prize, was just such as to stir his wild soul to the utmost. Suddenly he laughed, and whatever crimes stained the man’s soul, his laugh was as ringing and zestful as a gust of sea-wind, rising strange from a Moslem’s lips.

“We’ll need the Turkomans in this venture,” he said, and the girl clapped her hands with a brief passionate cry of joy, knowing she had won her plea.

III

“Hold up, *kunaks*!” Ivan Sablianka pulled up his steed and glanced about, craning his thick neck forward. Behind him his comrades shifted in their saddles. They were in a narrow canyon, flanked on either hand by steep slopes, grown with bushes and stunted firs. Before them a small spring welled up in the midst of straggling trees, and trickled away down a narrow moss-green channel.

“Water here, at least,” grunted Ivan. “The nags are tired. Light.”

Without a word the Cossacks dismounted, drew off the saddles, and allowed the weary horses to drink their fill, before they satisfied their own thirst. For days they had followed the trail of the wandering Algerians. Since leaving the coast and the village along the creek, they had seen only one sign of life – a huddle of mud-huts perched up high among the crags, housing nondescript skin-clad creatures who fled howling into the ravines at their approach. They had been thoroughly looted by the Algerians, so that the Cossacks had been hard put to it to scrape together feed for the horses. For the men there was no food. But the Cossacks had been hungry before.

The provisions with which they had filled their saddle-bags before leaving the village on the creek were exhausted. The Algerians had taken heavy toll of its store-houses and granaries, and the Cossacks, coming after, had stripped them. There was little grass in those mountains for grazing. Now the Cossacks were without food, and they had lost the trail of the corsairs.

The previous nightfall had found them rapidly overhauling their prey, as shown by the freshness of the spoor, and they had recklessly pushed on, thinking to come upon the Algerian camp in the night. But with the setting of the young moon, they had lost the trail in a maze of gullies and crags, and had wandered blindly and at random. Now at dawn they had found water, but their horses were worn out, and they themselves completely lost. This would never have occurred had they been led by a real *sotnik* or *essaul*. But they had no word of blame for Ivan, whose thoughtless recklessness had gotten them into their present situation.

“Get some sleep,” growled Ivan. “Togrukh, you and Stefan and Vladimir take the first watch. When the sun’s over that fir tree, wake three others to watch. I’m going to scout a bit up this gorge.”

He strode away up the canyon, soon lost among the straggling growth. Soon the way tilted upward, and the slopes on either hand changed to towering cliffs that rose sheer from the rock-littered floor. And with heart-stopping suddenness, from a tangle of bushes and broken boulders, a wild shaggy figure sprang up and confronted the Cossack. Ivan's breath hissed through his teeth as his sword glittered high in the air; then he checked the stroke, seeing that the apparition was weaponless. It was a lean gnome-like man in sheepskins. His eyes, glaring wildly from a tangle of lank hair, took in every detail of the giant Cossack, from his scalp-lock to his silver-heeled boots. They took in the stained mail shirt tucked into his wide nankeen breeches, the pistol butts jutting from his broad silken girdle, the sword in his huge hand.

"God of my fathers!" said the vagabond in the speech of the Cossacks. "What does one of the free brotherhood in this Turk-haunted land?"

"Who are you?" grunted Ivan warily.

"A man who has just seen his people slaughtered," answered the other with a wild laugh of mad despair. "I was the son of a *kral* of the Armenians – call me Kral. One name is good as another to an outcast. What do you here?"

"What lies beyond this canyon?" asked Ivan, instead of answering.

"Over yonder ridge which closes the lower end of this defile lies a tangle of gulches and crags. If you thread your way among them, you will come out overlooking the broad valley of Ekrem, which until yesterday was the home of my tribe, and which today holds their charred bones."

"Is there food there?"

"Aye – and death. A horde of Turkomans hold the valley."

As Ivan meditated this, a quick step brought him about, to see Togrukh approaching.

"Hai!" Ivan scowled. "You had an order to watch while the *kunaks* slept!"

"The *kunaks* are too cursed hungry to sleep," retorted the saturnine Cossack, eyeing the Armenian suspiciously.

"Devil bite you, Togrukh," growled the big warrior, "I can't conjure them mutton out of the air. They must gnaw their thumbs until we find a village to loot – "

"I can lead you to enough food to feed a regiment," interrupted Kral.

“Don’t mock me, *Ermenie*,” scowled Ivan; “you just said the Turkomans _ ”

“Nay,” cried Kral, “there is a place not far from here, unknown to the Moslems, where my people stored food secretly. Thither I was going when I saw you coming up the gorge and knew you for a *Kazak*.”

Togrukh looked at Ivan, who drew a pistol and cocked it.

“Then lead on, Kral,” said the Zaporogian, “but at the first false move – bang! goes a ball through your head.”

The Armenian laughed, a wild scornful laugh, and motioned for them to follow. He made straight toward the nearer cliff, and groping among a cluster of brittle bushes, disclosed what looked like a shallow crack in the wall. Beckoning them after him, he bent and crawled inside.

“Into that wolf’s den?” Togrukh glared suspiciously, but Ivan followed the Armenian, and the other came after him. They found themselves in, not a cave, but a narrow cleft of the cliff, in breathless twilight gloom. Ivan swore and grunted as he levered his huge bulk between the shouldering walls, but within a few paces it widened until the giant could walk with ease. Forty paces further they came out into a wide circular space, surrounded by towering walls that resembled monstrous honey-combs.

“These were the tombs of an ancient, unknown people who held this land before the coming of my ancestors,” said Kral. “Their bones have long turned to dust. The caves were empty, and there my people stored food against times of famine and pillage. Take your fill; there are no Armenians to need it.”

Ivan looked curiously about him. It was like being at the bottom of a giant well. The floor was solid rock, worn smooth and level, as if by the feet of ten thousand generations. The walls, honey-combed with regular tiers of tombs for fifty feet on all sides, rose stupendously, ending in a small circle of blue sky. A vulture hung in the blue disk like a tiny black dot.

“Your people should have dwelt here in these caves,” said Togrukh. “Then when the Turks came – cut, slash! One man could hold that outer cleft against a horde.”

The Armenian shrugged his shoulders. “Here there is no water. When the Turkomans swooped down there was not time to run and hide. My people were not warlike. They only wished to till the soil.”

Togrukh shook his head, unable to understand such natures. Kral was pulling food for man and beast out of the lower caves – leather bags of

grain, rice, moldy cheese, and dried meat, skins of sour wine.

"Go get some of the lads to help carry the stuff, *kunak*," directed Ivan, bending his massive back toward his heels to gaze up at the higher caves. "I'll stay here with Kral."

Togrukh swaggered off, his silver heels rapping on the stone, and Kral tugged at Ivan's steel-clad arm.

"Now do you believe I am a true man, *effendi*?"

"Aye, by God," Ivan answered, gnawing a handful of dried figs. "Any man that leads me to food is a friend of mine. But where were the villages of these ancients? They couldn't raise grain in that rocky canyon outside."

"They dwelt in the valley of Ekrem. Long, long ago my ancestors came out of the north and found them tilling the soil there. They slew them all and took their land."

"Well," grunted Ivan, "that's the way it goes. Now the Turks are slaughtering you fellows. But don't worry; some day we Cossacks will ride over the mountains and cut their throats. Slash, bang! that's the way it'll be. But if the old people dwelt in the valley, why didn't they lay away their dead closer by? It must be a long steep road from here to Ekrem."

Kral's eyes gleamed like a hungry wolf's. "That is the secret locked in the heart of these hills, known only to my people. But I will show you – and more, if you will trust me."

"Well, Kral," said Ivan, munching away with relish, "we Zaporogians have no need to lie and hide like a Jew. We're following that black devil Osman Pasha the corsair, who's somewhere in these mountains – "

"Osman Pasha is no more than three hours' ride from this spot."

"Ha!" Ivan dashed down the food he was munching, and caught at his sword, his blue eyes ablaze.

"*Kubadar* – take care!" cried Kral. "There are forty corsairs, armed with matchlocks and entrenched among the boulders of Diva gorge. And they have been joined by Arap Ali and his hundred and fifty Turkomans. How many warriors have you, *effendi*?"

Ivan twisted his flowing moustache without reply, scowling heavily. He scratched his head, wondering what an *ataman* would have done under these circumstances. Deep thinking always made him drowsy and he detested the effort. His head swam and his heavy arms ached with the desire to draw his great sword and forget the weariness of meditation in the dealing of gigantic strokes. It was significant that though he was the

foremost swordsman of the *Sjetsch*, he had never before been given the leadership of his comrades. He swore now at the necessity. He was wiser than his *kunaks*, but he frankly admitted that was no great evidence of wisdom. Like them, he was utterly reckless and improvident. Well led, they were invincible. Without wise leadership they would throw their lives away on a whim. He had made a mistake pushing on after dark, last night, but that fact had probably not occurred to any of them. Kral watched him keenly, reading the big Cossack's mental workings from the expressions of his broad bluff face.

"Osman Pasha is your enemy?"

"Enemy!" Ivan repeated aggrievedly. "I'll line my saddle with his hide – "

"*Pekki!* Then come with me, *Kazak*, and I will show you what no man save an Armenian has seen for a thousand years."

"What's that?" demanded Ivan suspiciously.

"A secret way – and a road of death for our enemies!"

Ivan took a step forward, then halted. "Wait. Here come the sir brothers. Listen to them swear, the dogs."

"Send them back into the canyon with the food," whispered Kral, as half a dozen scalp-locked warriors swaggered out of the cleft and gaped curiously around. Ivan faced them portentously, booted legs wide-straddled, belly thrust out, thumbs hooked into his girdle.

"Take up this stuff and lug it back to the spring, *kunaks*," he said with a grand gesture. "I told you I'd find food for you and the nags."

"And what of you?" queried Togrukh, who was bitten by the devil of curiosity, as he gnawed a strip of *pasderma* – sun-dried mutton.

"Don't fret about me," roared Ivan. "Am I not the *essaul*? I have words with Kral. Go back to camp and eat beans, devil bite you!"

After the clatter of their boot heels had faded down the cleft, Kral led the way to the opposite wall and showed Ivan a series of steps carved in the rock. Up these he went like a cat, while the Zaporogian followed more slowly, suspicious of the hand-holds. High above the last tier of tombs the dim ladder ended at the mouth of a cavern Ivan had not noticed from below. It was much larger than the others; in it Ivan could stand upright. He saw that, instead of being a mere notch in the cliff like the others, this cave ran back and disappeared in darkness.

“Up this shaft came the ancients bearing their dead,” said Kral. “It leads to the vale of Ekrem. Once another shaft led down from tier to tier to the floor of this place, but that has been long choked with the falling in of the walls. If you follow this tunnel, you will come out behind the castle of the Kurd, El Afdal Shirkuh, that overlooks Ekrem.”

“How shall it profit us?” grunted Ivan.

“Listen, and I will tell you a tale!” exclaimed Kral, squatting in the semi-darkness, his back against the cave-wall. “Yesterday when the slaughtering began, I strove for awhile with the Turki dogs; then when my comrades had been cut down, I fled, and leaving the valley, ran down the gorge of Diva. In the midst of this gorge there is a great heap of boulders, masked by thickets. I sought refuge there, only to find it occupied by a strange band of warriors. I was among them before I was aware of them, and they beat me down with the barrels of their pistols, and bound me, asking me questions as to what went on in the valley – for as they rode down the gorge, they had heard the shots and shouting, and had halted and entrenched themselves on the knoll, and were about to send scouts forward. They were Algerian pirates and they called their *emir* Osman Pasha.

“While they questioned me, a girl came riding like one mad, with the Turkomans at her heels. When she sprang from her horse and begged aid of Osman Pasha I recognized her as the Persian dancing-girl who dwells in the castle. He and his men scattered the Turkomans with a volley from their matchlocks, and then he talked with the girl, Ayesha. They had forgotten me and I lay near, bound, and heard all they said.

“For more than a year, Shirkuh has held a captive in his castle. I know, because I have taken grain and sheep to the castle, to be paid for after the Kurdish fashion – with curses and blows. *Kazak*, the prisoner is Orkhan, brother of Murad *Padishah*!”

The Cossack grunted in surprize.

“This Ayesha disclosed to Osman, and he swore to aid her in freeing the prince. As they talked the Turkomans returned in full force and reined in at a distance, wishful to attack, yet fearing the matchlocks. Osman hailed them, and they had speech, he and their chief Arap Ali who commands since their *khan* was slain, and at last the Turkoman came among the rocks and squatted at Osman’s fire and shared bread and salt. And the three plotted to rescue Prince Orkhan, and put him on the Ottoman throne.

“Ayesha had discovered the secret way from the castle. This day, just before sunset, the Turkomans are to attack the castle openly, and while they thus attract the attention of the Kurds, Osman and his Algerians are to come to the castle by the secret way. Ayesha will have returned to Orkhan, and will open the secret door for them. They will take the prince away, and ride into the hills, recruiting warriors. As they talked night fell, and I gnawed through my cords and slipped away.

“You wish vengeance – here is a chance for both vengeance and profit, *yah kahwand*! I will show you how to trap Osman. Slay him – slay the girl – and their followers – take Orkhan and wring a mighty price from Safia. She will pay you richly to keep him out of the way, or to slay him.”

“Show me,” grunted the Cossack incredulously. Kral nodded. Groping into a pile of goods in a corner, he produced a torch, which he lighted with flint and steel. Then beckoning Ivan, he started off down the cavern. The Zaporogian drew his broadsword and followed.

“No tricks, Kral,” he cautioned, “or your head leaves your shoulders.”

The Armenian’s laugh rang savagely bitter in the gloom. “Would I betray Christians to the butchers of my people? You and your swaggerers might rot in hell for all of me. But through you I may have vengeance. Therefore trust me.”

Ivan made no reply, and Kral led the way through a narrow doorway and into a tunnel beyond. Here the vaulted roof was higher than a man could reach, and three horses might have been ridden abreast. The smooth rock floor slanted slightly downward, and from time to time they came to short flights of steps cut into the stone, giving onto lower levels. Ivan twisted his moustache reflectively and stared about him. The flickering torch-light shone on figures carved all along the walls in bas-relief. They were mostly shapes of men, short, thick-bodied, with round heads and broad noses. They made war on one another, hunted lions, brought gifts to a fantastic anthropomorphic figure that must have been a god, and in some of the carvings fought men of an unmistakably different race, taller and more symmetrically shaped men, with long beards and hook noses. Ivan detected a faint resemblance between these figures and Kral.

As they progressed, the Cossack seemed to hear a murmur of running water from time to time. He mentioned this.

“We have left the tunnel the old ones made,” answered Kral. “We are in an old water-course now. Once a stream ran through here, cutting through the solid rock. For some reason it changed its course, God only knows how many thousands of years ago. It is that you hear, flowing through the darkness not far away, but through another channel. Soon you will see it. It has its head far up among the mountains, but is mainly subterranean.”

Presently Ivan heard the unmistakable ripple of falling water, and ahead of him the tunnel ended abruptly in what appeared to be a solid rock wall. But it was too smooth and symmetrical to be the work of nature; it was a huge block of stone, shaped by the hand of man, and about the edges stole a thin grey light. Extinguishing the torch, Kral fumbled in the darkness, and Ivan heard him strain and grunt. Then the block, which was hung on a stone pivot, swung aside and a sheet of silver shimmered before the Cossack’s eyes.

They stood in the narrow mouth of the tunnel, which was masked by a sheet of water rushing over the cliff high above. At the foot of the falls a circular pool foamed and eddied, and from it a narrow stream raced away down the gorge. Kral pointed out a ledge that ran from the mouth of the cavern, skirting the edge of the pool, and Ivan followed him, first wrapping his powder-flask and pistol-locks carefully in his silken sash. At the edge, the falling water formed such a thin sheet that neither man was completely soaked in gaining the outer world. Ivan saw that he was in a narrow gorge that was like a knife-cut through the hills. Nowhere was it more than forty or fifty paces wide, and on either hand sheer cliffs towered for hundreds of feet, higher on the left than on the right. No vegetation grew anywhere,

except for a fringe about the edge of the pool, and along the course of the narrow stream. This stream crossed the canyon floor meanderingly to plunge into a narrow crack in the opposite cliff – eventually to find its way into the river that traversed Ekrem, Kral said. Ivan glanced back the way they had come; the falling water completely masked the tunnel-mouth. Even with the door-block pulled aside, he could have sworn the falls rushed down a blank stone wall.

He followed Kral up the gorge which did not run straight, but turned and twisted like a tortured snake. Within three hundred paces they lost sight of the waterfall and only a confused murmur came to their ears. At this point also, the floor of the gorge began to slant upward at a steep pitch. A few more hundred paces and the Armenian, leading the way with renewed caution, drew back, clutching his companion's arm. A stunted tree stood at a sharp angle of the rock wall, and behind this Kral crouched, pointing.

Looking over his shoulder, the Zaporogian grunted. Beyond the angle the gorge ran on for perhaps eighty paces, then ended in a blank impasse. But on his right hand the cliff seemed curiously altered, and he stared for an instant before he realized that he was looking at a man-made wall. They were almost behind a castle built in a notch of the cliffs. Its wall rose sheer from the edge of a deep crevice; no bridge spanned this chasm, and the only apparent entrance in the wall was a heavy iron-braced door.

"It was by this path that the girl Ayesha escaped," said Kral. "This gorge runs almost parallel to Ekrem; it narrows to the west and finally comes into the valley beyond where the villages stood. The Kurds blocked the entrance there with stones so that it can not be discovered from the outer valley, unless one knows of it. They seldom use this road. And even they know nothing of the tunnel behind the waterfall, or the Caves of the Dead. But yonder door Ayesha will open to Osman Pasha."

Ivan gnawed his moustache. He yearned to loot the castle himself, but he saw no way to come to it. The chasm was too wide for a man to leap, and anyway, there was no ledge to cling to on the other side.

"By Allah, Kral," said he, "I'd like to look on this noted valley."

The Armenian glanced at his bulk and shook his head.

"There is a way we call the Eagle's Road, but it is not for such as you."

"By God!" roared the giant Cossack, bristling instantly. "Is a skin-clad heathen a better man than a Zaporogian? I'll go anywhere you dare!"

Kral shrugged his shoulders and led the way back down the gorge until they came within sight of the waterfall again. There he stopped at what looked at first glance like a shallow groove worn by corrosion in the higher cliff-wall. Looking closely Ivan saw a series of shallow hand-holds notched into the solid rock. He twisted his moustache, nonplussed.

"Dogs bite you, Kral," he grumbled, "an ape could hardly scale these pock-marks."

"I climbed this ladder before I had seen fifteen winters," grinned Kral mirthlessly. "Unsling your girdle and I'll help you as we climb."

Ivan's pride struggled with his curiosity plainly in his broad face for an instant; then with a shrug he kicked off his silver-heeled boots and unwound his girdle – a strong length of silk, yards long. One end he bound to his sword-belt, the other he made fast to the Armenian's girdle. Thus equipped they began the dizzy journey. They climbed slowly but Ivan had an uncomfortable feeling that Kral could have run up the "ladder" like a cat, had he been climbing alone. The Cossack clung to the shallow pits with toes and finger-nails, and time and again the hairs of his scalp-lock bristled and his blood turned to ice as he slipped on the sheer of the cliff. Half a dozen times only Kral's support saved him. But at last they gained the pinnacle, and Ivan sat down, his feet dangling over the edge, and tried to regain his breath. He glanced down at the narrow shaft up which they had come, and swore. The gorge twisted like a snake-track beneath him, and from his position he looked over the southern wall into the valley of Ekrem, with its river winding serpentine through it.

Smoke still floated lazily up from the blackened masses that had been villages. Down the valley, on the right bank of the river, were pitched a number of hide tents. Ivan made out men swarming about these tents, like milling ants in the distance. They seemed to be saddling horses. There were the Turkomans, Kral said, and pointed out the mouth of a narrow canyon up the valley, and on the southern side, up which, he said, the Algerians were encamped. It was the castle, however, that drew Ivan's interest.

This castle was set solidly on a promontory of almost solid rock that jutted out from the cliffs and sloped down into the valley. The castle faced the valley, entirely surrounded by a massive wall twenty feet high, and furnished with towers for archers at regular intervals, though there were no towers on the side that backed against the cliff behind. A massive gate

flanked on either hand by a tower pierced with slanting slits for arrows commanded the outer slope.

From this gate, the crag slanted to the valley floor, not too steeply to be climbed with ease. But the ascent offered no cover. Men charging up it would be naked to a raking fire from the towers. Ivan shrugged his gigantic shoulders.

“The devil himself couldn’t take that castle by storm, even with cannon. One couldn’t drag bombards up the slope with the dog-brothers on the wall shooting at him. If the cannon were in the gorge – but devil take it, we’ve no cannon. How are we to come at the Soldan’s brother in that pile of rock? Lead us to Osman Pasha. I want to take his head back to the *Sjetsch*.”

“Be wary if you wish to wear your own, *Kazak*,” answered Kral grimly. “Look down into the gorge. What do you see?”

“A vastness of bare stone and a fringe of green along the stream,” grunted Ivan, craning his thick neck.

Kral grinned like a wolf. “*Taib!* And do you notice the fringe is much denser on the right bank, which is likewise higher than the other? Listen! Hidden behind the waterfall we can watch until the Algerians come up the gorge. Then we will hide ourselves among the bushes along the stream and waylay them as they return with the prince. We’ll kill them all except Orkhan, whom we will take captive. Then we will go back along the tunnel through the Caves of the Dead, to the horses, and return to your land.”

“That’s easy,” responded Ivan, twisting his long moustache. “We’ll take a galley from the Turks; we’ll lie in wait along the shore until we see one anchor. Then we’ll swim out by night with our sabers in our teeth, and climb up the chains. Slash, stab, death to you, dog-souls! That’s the way it’ll be. We’ll cut off the heads of the *begs* and chain the rest to the oars to row us back across the sea. But what’s this?”

Kral stiffened as the Cossack pointed. Men were galloping out of the distant Turkoman camp, lashing their horses across the shallow river. The sunlight struck glints from lance-points. On the castle walls helmets began to sparkle.

“The attack!” cried Kral, glaring. “*Jannam!* They have changed their plans! They were not to attack until nigh sunset! *Chabuk* – quick! We must get down the gorge before the Algerians come up it and catch us like rats in a trap!”

He glared down the defile, vanishing to the west like a saber-cut among the cliffs, straining his eyes for glint of shield or helmet that would warn of approaching warriors. As far as he could see the gorge lay bare of life. He urged Ivan over the cliff, and the big warrior cautiously levered his bulk into the shallow groove, cursing bitterly as he bumped his elbows. Descending seemed even more perilous than ascending, but at last they stood in the gorge, and Kral hastened toward the waterfall, a furtive hurried figure, grotesque in his sheepskins. He sighed as they reached the pool, crossed the ledge and plunged through the fall. But even as they came into the ghostly twilight beyond, he halted, gripping Ivan's iron-sheathed arm. Above the rush of the water, his keen ears had caught the clink of steel on rock. They looked out through the silver shimmering sheet that made all things look ghostly and unreal, and hid themselves effectually from the eyes of any outside. A shudder shook Kral. They had not gained their refuge an instant too soon.

A band of men was coming along the gorge – tall, strong men in mail hauberks and turban-bound helmets. At their head strode one taller than the rest, whose features, black-bearded and hawk-like as theirs, yet differed subtly from those of his followers. His straight grey eyes seemed to look full into the smoldering blue eyes of the giant Cossack, as the corsair glanced at the waterfall. A deep sigh rose from the depths of Ivan's capacious belly, and his iron hand locked convulsively about his hilt. Impulsively he took a quick step forward, but Kral threw his knotted arms about him and hung on desperately.

"In God's name, *Kazak*!" he cried in a frenzied whisper. "Don't throw away our lives! We have them in a trap. If you rush out now, they'll shoot you down like a rat – then who'll take Osman's head back to the *Sjetsch*?"

Kral knew the reckless spirit of the Cossacks, for he had wandered among them as a trader, like many of his race.

"I could send a ball through his skull from here," muttered Ivan.

"Nay, it would betray our hiding-place, and even if you brought him down, you could not take his head. Patience, oh patience! I tell you, we will take them all! Not a dog of them shall escape. Hate? Look at that lean vulture in sheepskins and *kalpak* beside Osman. That is Arap Ali, the Turkoman chief, who slew my young sister and her husband. Do you hate Osman? By the God of my fathers, my very brain reels with madness to

leap out upon Arap Ali and rend his throat with my teeth! But patience! Patience!”

The Algerians were crossing the narrow stream, their *khalats* girt high, holding their matchlocks above their heads to keep the charges dry. On the further bank they halted, in an attitude of listening. Presently, above the rush of the waters, the men in the cave-mouth heard a faint booming sound that came from up the gorge.

“The Kurds are firing from the towers!” whispered Kral. As if it were a signal for which they were waiting, the Algerians shouldered their pieces and started swiftly up the gorge. Kral touched the Cossack’s arm.

“Bide ye here and watch. I’ll hasten back and bring the sir brothers. It will be touch and go if I can get them here before the pirates return.”

“Haste, then,” grunted the giant, and Kral slipped away like a shadow.

IV

In a broad chamber luxuriant with gold-worked tapestries, silken divans and embroidered velvet cushions, the prince Orkhan reclined. He seemed the picture of voluptuous idleness as he lounged there in green satin vest, silken *khalat* and velvet slippers, a crystal jar of wine at his elbow. His dark eyes, brooding and introspective, were those of a dreamer, whose dreams are tinted with hashish and opium. But there were strong lines in his keen face, not yet erased by sloth and dissipation, and under the rich robe his limbs were clean-cut and hard. His gaze rested on Ayesha, who tensely gripped the bars of a casement, peering eagerly out, but there was a faraway look in his eyes. He seemed not to be aware of the shots, yells and clamor that raged without. Absently he murmured the lines written by a more famous exile of his house:

"Jam-i-Jem nush eyle, ey Jem, bu Firankistan dir – "

Ayesha moved restlessly, throwing him a quick glance over her slim shoulder. Somewhere in this daughter of Iran burned the blood of ancient Aryan conquerors who knew not *Kismet*. A thousand overlying generations of Oriental fatalism had not washed it out. Outwardly Ayesha was a devout Moslem. At heart she was an untamed pagan. She had fought like a tigress to keep Orkhan from falling into the gulf of degeneracy and resignation his captors had prepared for him. "Allah wills it" – the phrase embraces a whole Turanian philosophy, is at once excuse and consolation for failure. But hot in Ayesha's veins ran the fierce blood of the yellow-haired kings who trod down Nineveh and Babylon in their road to empire, and recognized no power higher than their own desires. She was the scourge that kept Orkhan stung into life and ambition.

"It is time," she breathed, turning from the casement. "The sun hangs at the zenith. The Turkomans ride up the slope, lashing their steeds and loosing their arrows in vain against the walls. The Kurds shoot down on them – hark to the roar of the firelocks! The bodies of the tribesmen strew the slopes and the survivors give back – now they come on again, like madmen. They are dying for thee, *yah khawand!* I must hasten – thou shalt yet sit on the throne on the Golden Horn, my lover!"

Casting her lithe form prostrate before him, she kissed his slippered feet in a very ecstasy of passion, then rising, hurried out of the chamber, through

another where ten giant black mutes kept guard night and day, and traversing a corridor, found herself in the outer court that lay between the castle and the postern wall. No one had tried to halt her. She was free to come and go within the walls as much as she liked, though Orkhan was forever guarded by the mutes, and not allowed outside his chamber unless accompanied by Shirkuh himself. Few questions had been asked her when she returned to the castle, feigning great fear of the Turkomans. She had carefully hidden her infatuation for the prince from the eagle eyes of the Kurdish chief, who thought her no more than the tool of Safia.

She crossed the court and approached the door that let into the gorge. One warrior leaned there, disgruntled because he could not take part in the fighting that was going on. Shirkuh was a cautious man. The rear of his castle seemed invulnerable, but he never took unnecessary chances. It was not his fault that he was unaware of a traitress in his midst. Wiser men than El Afdal Shirkuh have been gulled and duped by women like Ayesha.

The man on guard was an Uzbek, one of those wandering turbulent warriors who served all the rulers of Asia as mercenaries. He was of broader build than the Kurds, his kinship to the Mongols evidenced by his broad face, slightly slanting eyes and darkly reddish hair. His small turban was knotted over his left ear, his wide girdle loaded with knives and pistols. He leaned on a matchlock, scowling, as Ayesha approached him, her dark eyes eloquent above the filmy veil.

He spat and glowered. “What do you here, woman?” She drew her light mantle closer about her slender shoulders, trembling.

“I am afraid. The cries and shots frighten me, *bahadur*. The prince is drugged with opium, and there is none to soothe my fears.”

She would have fired the frozen heart of a dead man as she stood there, in her attitude of trembling fear and supplication. The Uzbek plucked his beard.

“Fear not, little gazelle,” he said finally. “I’ll soothe thee, by Allah!” He laid a black-nailed hand on her shoulder and drew her close to him. “None shall lay a finger on a lock of thy hair,” he muttered, “neither Turkoman, Kurd nor – ahhh!”

Snuggling in his arms, she had slipped a dagger from her sash and thrust it through his bull-throat. His hand lurched from her shoulder to claw at the hilts in his girdle, while the other clutched at his beard, blood spurting between the fingers. He reeled and fell heavily. Ayesha snatched a bunch of

keys from his girdle and without a second glance at her victim ran to the door. Her heart was in her mouth as she swung it open; then she gave a low cry of joy. On the opposite edge of the chasm stood Osman Pasha with his pirates.

A heavy plank, used for a bridge, lay inside the gate, but it was far too heavy for her to handle. Chance had enabled her to use it for her previous escape, when rare carelessness had left it in place across the chasm and unguarded for a few minutes. Osman tossed her the end of a rope, and this she made fast to the hinges of the door. The other end was gripped fast by half a dozen strong men, and three Algerians crossed the crevice, swinging hand over hand as agilely as apes. Then they lifted the plank and spanned the chasm for the rest to cross. There was no sight of a defender. The firing from the front of the castle continued without a break.

"Twenty men stay here and guard the bridge," snapped Osman. "The rest follow me."

Leaving their matchlocks, twenty desperate sea-wolves drew their steel and followed their chief. Osman grinned in pure joy as he led them swiftly after the light-footed girl. Such a desperate, touch-and-go venture, in the heart of the lion's lair, stirred his wild blood like wine. As they entered the castle, a servitor sprang up and gaped at them, frozen. Before he could cry out Arap Ali's razor-edged *yataghan* sliced through his throat, and the band rushed recklessly on, into the chamber where the ten mutes sprang up, gripping their scimitars. There was a flurry of fierce, silent battling, noiseless except for the hiss and rasp of steel and the croaking gasp of the wounded. Three Algerians died, and over the mangled bodies of the black defenders, Osman Pasha strode into the inner chamber.

Orkhan rose up and his quiet eyes gleamed with an old fire as Osman, with an instinct for dramatics, knelt before him and lifted the hilt of his blood-stained scimitar.

"These are the warriors who shall set you on your throne!" cried Ayesha, clenching her white hands in passionate joy. "*Yah Allah!* Oh, my lord, what an hour this is!"

"But let us go quickly, before these Kurdish dogs are aware of us," said Osman, motioning the warriors to draw up about Orkhan in a solid clump of steel. Swiftly they traversed the chambers, crossed the court and approached the gate. But the clang of steel had been heard. Even as the raiders were crossing the bridge, a medley of savage yells rose behind them.

Across the courtyard rushed a tall figure in silk and steel, followed by fifty helmeted swordsmen.

“Shirkuh!” screamed Ayesha, paling. *“La Allah – ”*

“Cast down the plank!” roared Osman, springing to the bridge-head.

On each side of the chasm matchlocks flashed and roared. Half a dozen Kurds crumpled, but the four Algerians who had stooped to lift the plank and thrust it off the precipice went down in a writhing heap before a raking volley, and across the bridge rushed Shirkuh, his hawk-face convulsed, his scimitar flashing about his steel-clad head. Osman Pasha met him breast to breast, and in a glittering whirl of steel, the corsair’s scimitar grated around Shirkuh’s blade, and the keen edge cut through the chain mail and the thick muscles at the base of the Kurd’s neck. Shirkuh staggered and with a wild cry pitched back and over, headlong down the chasm.

In an instant the Algerians had cast the bridge after him, and the Kurds halted, yelling with baffled fury, on the far side of the crevice. What had been their strength now became their weakness. They could not reach their foes. But sheltered by the wall they opened up a vengeful fire, and three more Algerians were struck before the band could get out of range around the angle of the cliff. Osman cursed. Ten men was more than he had expected to lose on that flying raid.

“All but six of you go forward and see that the way is clear,” he ordered. “I will follow more slowly with the prince. *Mirza*, I could not bring a horse up the defile, but I will have my dogs carry you in a litter of cloaks slung between spears – ”

“Allah forbid that I should ride on the shoulders of my deliverers!” cried the young Turk in a ringing voice. “I will not forget this day! Again I am a man! I am Orkhan, son of Selim! I will not forget that, either, *Inshallah!*”

“*Mashallah* – God be praised!” whispered the Persian girl. “Oh, my lord, I am blind and dizzy with joy to hear you speak thus! In good truth, you are a man again, and shall be *Padishah* of all the Osmanli!”

They were within sight of the waterfall. The first detachment had almost reached the stream, when suddenly and unexpectedly as the stroke of a hidden cobra, a pistol cracked in the bushes on the other side, and a warrior fell, his brains oozing from a hole in his skull. Instantly, as if the shot were a signal, there crashed a volley from the bushes. The foremost corsairs went down like ripe corn, and the rest gave back, shouting in rage and terror. They could see no sign of their attackers, save the smoke billowing across the stream, and the dead men at their feet.

“Dog!” roared Osman Pasha, ripping out his scimitar and turning on Arap Ali. “This is your work!”

“Have I matchlocks?” squalled the Turkoman, his dark face ashen. “*Ya Ali, alahu!* It is the work of devils – ”

Osman ran down the gorge toward his demoralized men, cursing madly. He knew that the Kurds would rig up some sort of a bridge across the chasm and pursue him, when he would be caught between two fires. Who his assailants were he had no idea. Up the gorge toward the castle he still heard the cracking of matchlocks, and suddenly a great burst of firing seemed to come from the outer valley, but pent in that narrow gorge which muffled and distorted all sounds, he could not be sure.

The smoke had cleared away from the stream, but the Moslems could see nothing except a sinister stirring of the bushes on the opposite bank. They fell back, looking for shelter; there was none, except back up the gorge, into the fangs of the maddened Kurds. They were trapped. They began to loose their matchlocks blindly into the bushes, evoking only mocking laughter from the hidden assailants. Osman started violently as he heard that laughter, and beat down the muzzles of the firelocks.

“Fools! Will you waste powder firing at shadows? Draw your steel and follow me!”

And with the fury of desperation, the Algerians charged headlong at the ambush, their cloaks streaming, their eyes blazing, naked steel glittering in their hands. A raking volley thinned their ranks, but they plunged on, leaped

recklessly into the water and began to wade across. And now from among the thick bushes on the further bank rose wild figures, mail-clad or half-naked, curved swords in their hands. “Up and at ’em, sir brothers!” bellowed a great voice. “Cut, slash, ho – Cossacks fight!”

A yell of incredulous amazement rose from the Moslems at the sight of the lean eager figures, from whose head-pieces and sabers the sun struck fire. Then with a deep-throated thunderous roar of savagery they closed, and the rasp and clangor of steel rose and re-echoed from the cliffs. The first Algerians to spring up the higher bank fell back into the stream, their heads split, and then the Cossacks, mad with fighting fury, leaped down the bank and met their foes hand-to-hand, thigh-deep in water that swiftly swirled crimson. There was no quarter asked or given; Cossack and Algerian, they slashed and slew in blind frenzy, froth whitening their moustaches, sweat running into their eyes.

Arap Ali ran into the thick of the melee, mad with fear and rage, his eyes glaring like a rabid dog’s. His curved blade split a Cossack’s shaven head to the teeth; then Kral faced him, bare-handed and screaming.

The Turkoman halted an instant, daunted by the wild beast ferocity in the Armenian’s writhing features; then with an awful cry Kral sprang and his fingers locked like steel in the chief’s throat. Heedless of the dagger Arap drove again and again into his side, Kral hung on, blood starting from under his finger-nails to mingle with the crimson that gushed from the Turkoman’s torn throat, until, losing their footing, both pitched into the stream. Still tearing and rending they were washed down the current; now one snarling face showed above the crimsoned surface, now another, until at last both vanished forever.

The Algerians were driven back up the left bank where they made a brief, bloody stand; then they fell back, dazed and ferocious, toward where Prince Orkhan stared like one dazed, in the shadow of the cliff, with the small knot of warriors Osman had detailed to guard him. Ayesha knelt, gripping his knees. The prince’s eyes were stunned; thrice he moved as though to seize a sword and cast himself into the fray, but Ayesha’s arms were like slender steel bands about his knees. Osman Pasha, breaking away from the battle, hastened to him. The corsair’s scimitar was red to the hilt, his mail hacked, blood dripping from beneath his helmet. All about raged and eddied single combats and struggling groups, as the fighting scattered out over the gorge. The gorge was become a blood-splashed shambles. Not many were left on

either side to fight, but there were more Cossacks on their feet than Muhammadans.

Through the wash of the melee Ivan Sablianka strode, brandishing his great sword in his sledge-like fist. Such as opposed him were beaten down with strokes that shattered leather-covered bucklers, caved in steel caps and clove alike through chain-mail, flesh and bone.

“Hey, you rascals!” he roared in his barbarous Turki. “I want your head, Osman, and the fellow beside you there – Urkhan. Don’t be afraid, prince – I won’t harm you. You’ll bring us Cossacks a pretty penny, may I eat pap if you won’t!”

Osman’s keen eyes flickered about, looking desperately for an avenue of escape. He saw the dim groove leading up the cliff, and his keen brain instantly divined its use.

“*Chabuk, yah khawand!* Quick, my lord!” he whispered. “Up the cliff! I’ll hold off this barbarian while you climb!”

“Aye!” Ayesha urged eagerly. “Oh, haste! I can climb like a cat! I will come behind you and aid you! It is desperate, but oh, my prince, it is a chance, and this is but to fall back into chains and captivity again!”

She was tense and quivering with eagerness to strive and fight like a wild thing for the man she loved. But the mask of fatalism had descended again on Prince Orkhan. He did not lack courage, even for such a climb. But the paralyzing philosophy of futility had him in its grip. He looked about where the victorious Cossacks were cutting down those who yet lived of his new-found allies. And he bowed his handsome head.

“Nay, this is *Kismet*. Allah does not will that I should press the throne of my fathers. Nay, what man can escape his fate?”

Ayesha blenched, her eyes flaring in a sort of horror, her hands catching at her locks. Osman, realizing the prince’s mood, whirled, sprang for the shaft himself and went up it as only a sailor could climb. With a roar Ivan charged after him, forgetting all about the prince. Cossacks were approaching, shaking red drops from their sabers. Orkhan spread his hands resignedly, and Ayesha watched him, her lips parted in dumb agony.

“Che arz kunam?” he said simply, facing his new captors. “Take me if you will; I am Orkhan.”

Ayesha swayed, her hands clasped over her closed eyes, as if about to faint. Then springing like a flash of light, she thrust her dagger straight through Prince Orkhan’s heart and he died on his feet, so quickly that he

scarcely felt the sting of the stroke. And as he fell, she turned the point and drove it home in her own breast, and sank down beside her lover. Moaning softly, she cradled his princely head in her weakening arms, while the rough Cossacks stood about, awed and not understanding.

A sound up the gorge made them lift their heads and stare at each other. There was but a handful, weary and dazed with battle, their garments soaked with water and blood, their sabers clotted and nicked. Ivan was gone, and they were at a loss as to what to do.

"Get back into the tunnel, brothers," grunted Togrukh. "I hear men coming down the gorge. Get back through the tunnel to the place where we left the horses. Saddle and make ready to ride. I'm going after Ivan."

They obeyed and he started up the cliff, swearing at the shallow hand-holds. They had scarcely vanished behind the silvery sheet, and he had not reached the crest of the cliff, when a number of men came into sight, marching hurriedly. The gorge was thronged with warlike figures. Togrukh, looking down with the curiosity of the Cossack, saw the turbans and *khalats* of the Kurds of the castle, and with them the peaked white caps of Turkish janizaries. One wore half a dozen bird-of-paradise plumes in his cap, and Togrukh gaped to recognize the Agha of the janizaries, the third man of power in the Ottoman empire. He and his followers were dusty, as if from long hard riding. Glancing toward the valley, the lean Cossack saw the Agha's standard of three white horse-tails flying from the castle gate, and along the river the sheepskin-clad Turkomans were riding like mad for the hills, pursued by horsemen in glittering mail – the Turkish spahis. Togrukh shook his head in wonder. What brought the Agha of the janizaries in such array to the lonely valley of Ekrem?

Down in the gorge rose a chorus of horrified voices, as the newcomers halted dumfounded among the corpses. The Agha knelt beside the dead man and the dying girl.

"Allah! It is Prince Orkhan!"

"He is beyond your power," murmured Ayesha. "You can not hurt him any more. I would have made him king. But you had robbed him of his manhood – so I killed him – better an honorable death, than – "

"But I bring him the crown of Turkey!" cried the Agha desperately. "Murad is dead, and the people have risen against Safia's half-caste son – "

"Too late!" whispered Ayesha. "Too – too – late!" Her dark head sank on her white round arm like a child when it falls asleep.

V

As Ivan Sablianka went up the shaft-ladder, Kral was not there to aid him, because Kral lay dead beside dead Arap Ali under the blood-stained stream. But this time hate spurred him on, and he swarmed up the precarious path as recklessly as if he clambered a ship's ratlines. Bits of crumbling stone gave way beneath his grasp and rattled down the cliff in tiny avalanches, but somehow he cheated death each time, and heaved relentlessly upward. He was not far behind Osman Pasha when the corsair came out on the cliff and set off through the stunted firs. Ivan came after him, his long legs carrying his giant frame across the ground at a surprizing rate, and presently Osman, turning and seeing he had but one foe to deal with, faced round with a curse.

A fierce grin bristled the corsair's curly black beard. Here was a huge frame on which he could carve his savage disgust at the muddling of his plans. Only a few months before he had been the most feared sea-lord in the world, with the broad blue Mediterranean at his feet. Now he was shorn of all following and power, except that gripped in his strong right hand, and locked in his skull. He was too much of the true adventurer to waste time in bemoaning his fall, but the chance of hewing down this pestiferous Cossack gave him a grim satisfaction.

Easier thought than done. For all his slow wits and his bulk, Ivan was quick as a huge cat on his feet. Steel clanged on steel, the long straight blade of the Zaporogian beat down on the Algerian scimitar. The corsair was almost as tall as the Cossack, though not so heavily built. His scimitar was straighter and heavier than most Moslem blades, and he showed a remarkable aptitude for the point as well as the edge. Thrice only Ivan's tattered mail saved him from the corsair's vicious thrusts. These he alternated with whistling cuts which nicked bits of metal from Ivan's harness and soon had him bleeding from half a dozen flesh wounds. It was Osman's purpose to keep the giant on the defensive, where his superior strength would not aid him as it would in attack. His shaven, sun-burnt head bobbed before the corsair's eyes, the tawny scalp-lock flowing in the wind, and Osman hacked and hewed at it until the sweat ran into his eyes and his breath came short. But somehow Ivan always managed to parry or avoid his

most dangerous strokes. Osman's scimitar slithered off the straight blade, or clashed on the flaring hand-guard.

There was no sound except the clangor of steel, the gasp of hard-driven breath, and the thud and shuffle of the fighters' feet. The sheer power of the Cossack began to tell. From a whirlwind offensive, Osman found himself gradually forced back on the defense, using all his strength and skill to parry the Cossack's terrible sweeping blows. With a gasping cry he staked all on a desperate onslaught and leaped like a tiger, scimitar glittering above his head. He was aware of an icy pang under his heart, and convulsively clutching with his naked hand the blade that had impaled him, he slashed with his last ounce of strength at his slayer's head. Ivan caught the stroke on his upflung left arm; the keen edge bit through mail-links and flesh to the bone. The scimitar dropped from Osman's nerveless hand, and he slid off the impaling blade to the blood-soaked earth. And from his pallid lips burst words in a strange tongue, "God ha' mercy on me – I'll see Devon no more!"

Ivan started violently, blenching, and then with a cry dropped to his knees beside him, forgetful of his own blood-spurting wound. Gripping his foe he shook him fiercely, crying in the same tongue, "What did ye say? What did ye say?"

The glazing eyes rolled up at him, and Ivan tore the helmet from the wounded man's head. And he cried out as if Osman had stabbed him.

"God's mercy! *Roger!* Black Roger Bellamy! Don't ye know me, lad? 'Tis John Hawksby – old Jack Hawksby, that fought wi' ye and for ye when we were lads together in Devon! Ah, God forgive us, that we should meet like this! And in a naked land, unknowing. How come ye in such pagan guise, Roger?"

"A long yarn and scant time to tell it," muttered the renegade. "Nay, John," as the big man began tearing strips from his garments to staunch the blood he had just let so willingly, "nay, I'm done for. Let me bide. I was with Drake when he struck for Lisbon and lost so many good ships and stout lads. I was one the Spaniards took. They bound me to a galley's oar. Something broke in me as I toiled there beneath the lash. I forgot England, aye, and God too.

"A Barbary rover took the galley and the *kapudan-pasha* – Seyf-ed-din it was – offered the slaves their lives if they became Moslems. The galleys make a man forget much – even that he was a Christian. 'Tis maybe no

great step from buccaneer to corsair. I only wanted to hammer Spain, at first. Then as I rose in power I forgot more and more the blood in me. I swept the seas o' Christian and Muhammadan alike. Aye, now the tang o' paynim fame and red glory is dust in my mouth. How come you in the manner of a Cossack?"

"Drink and the women, lad," answered Ivan Sablianka, who had been John Hawksby of Devon. "I couldn't bide in Devon because o' feuds and fights wi' divers people. I wandered eastward until I lost the memory and feeling o' England. Sink my bones, I've been as great a heathen as you, Roger. But do ye mind the great old days when we pounded the Dons on the Main?"

"Remember?" the dying man's eyes blazed and he lurched up on his elbow, blood gushing from his mouth. "God, to sail again with Drake and Grenville! To laugh with them as we laughed when we ripped Philip's Armada to shreds! – Let go the weather braces! – that's Sidonia's flagship! – man the pumps, bullies, I'll not strike while there's a plank beneath my feet! – give 'em a broadside – the starboard guns – hangers and pistolets, there – "

He sank back, the babble of delirium dying on his lips. Ivan, kneeling beside the dead man, was lost in memory until a clink of steel on stone brought him round instinctively, sword ready. Togrukh stood near him in the gathering twilight.

"I see you've run down the dog. The lads have gone back into the tunnel. There's only nine of 'em left to run, besides ourselves. The gorge is full of Turks. We'll have to make our way across the cliffs to where we left the horses. What are you about?"

Ivan had spread the corsair's mantle over the dead pirate.

"I'm going to lay stones over him, so the vultures can't pick his bones," he answered stolidly.

"But his head!" expostulated the other. "His head to show the sir brothers!"

The giant faced about in the dusk so grimly that Togrukh involuntarily stepped back.

"He's dead, isn't he?"

"Aye, right enough."

"And you'll bear witness to the sir brothers that I killed him, won't you?"

"Yes, but – "

“Then let it rest there,” grunted Ivan, bending his powerful back as he began to lift the stones and heap them in place.

Miscellanea

Untitled Fragment

(The Track of Bohemund)

As the moon glided from behind a mass of fleecy clouds, etching the shadows of the woods in a silvery glow, the man sprang into a dark clump of bushes, like a hunted thing that fears the disclosing light. As a clink of shod hoofs came plainly to him, he drew further back into his covert, scarcely daring to breathe. In the silence a nightbird called sleepily, and he heard, in the distance, the lazy lap of waters against the shore. The moon slid again behind a drifting cloud, just as the horseman emerged from the trees on the other side of the small glade. The man, hugging his covert, cursed silently. He could make out only a vague moving mass; could hear only the clink stirrups and the creak of leather. Then the moon came out again, and with a deep gasp of relief, the hider sprang from among the bushes.

The horse reared and snorted, the rider yelped a startled oath, and a short spear gleamed in his lifted hand. The apparition which had so suddenly sprung to his horse's head was not one calculated to reassure a lonely wayfarer. It was a tall, rangily powerful man, naked but for a loin cloth, his steely muscles rippling in the moonlight.

"Back, or I run you through!" snarled the horseman, in Turki. "Who are you, in Satan's name?"

"Roger de Cogan," answered the other in Norman-French. "Speak softly. We are scarce a mile from a Moslem rendezvous, and they may have scouts out. I marvel that you have not been taken. Up the shore, in a small bay screened with tall trees, there are three galleys hidden, and I saw the glitter of arms ashore. This night I escaped from the galley of the famed pirate, the Arab Yusef idbn Zalim, where I have toiled for months at the oars. He made the rendezvous, for what reason I know not, but fearing treachery of some sort from the Turks, anchored outside the bay. And now he lies at the bottom of the gulf, for I broke my chain, came quietly upon him as he drowsed in the bows, strangled him, and swam ashore."

The horseman grunted, sitting his horse like a statue, etched in the moonlight. He was tall, clad in grey chain-mail which did not hide the hard lines of his rangy limbs, an iron cap pushed back carelessly on his steel-hooded head. Even in the uncertain light, the fugitive was impressed by the man's hawk-like, predatory features.

“I think you lie,” he said, speaking Norman-French with a peculiar accent. “You a galley slave, with your hair new cropped and your face freshly shaven? And what Moslem galleys would dare hide on the European shore, so close to the city?”

“Why, by God,” answered the other in evident surprize, “you can not deny that I am a Christian. As to my hair and beard, I think it a poor thing that a cavalier should allow himself to become sloven, even in captivity. One of the captives on board the galley was a Greek barber, and only this morning I prevailed upon him to shear and shave me. As for the other, all men know that the Moslems steal up and down the Bosphorus and the Sea of Marmora almost at will. But we risk our lives standing here babbling. Give me a stirrup and let us be gone.”

“I think not,” muttered the horseman. “You have seen too much.”

And with a powerful heave of his whole frame, he drove the spear straight toward the other’s broad breast. So unexpected was the action, that it was only the instinctive movement of the victim which saved him. Caught flat-footed, his steel-trap coordination yet electrified him a flashing fraction of an instant quicker than the driving steel, which cut the skin on his shoulder as it hissed past him. But it was not blind instinct which caused him to grasp the spear-shaft and jerk back savagely. Rage at the unprovoked woke the killing lust in his brain. The avoiding of the blow and the jerk at the spear-shaft were the work of an instant. Over-reached and off balance from the missed stroke, the horseman tumbled headlong from the saddle, full on his antagonist’s breast, and they crashed to the ground together, the horseman’s carelessly worn helmet falling from his head. The horse snorted and bolted to the edge of the trees.

The stranger had released the spear as he fell, and now, close locked, the fighters rolled across the open space and crashed among the bushes. The mailed hand clutched at the sheathed dagger, but de Cogan was quicker. With a volcanic heave, he reared himself above his antagonist, clutching a heavy stone on which his fingers had blindly closed. The dagger was out, gleaming in the moonlight, but before it could drive home, the stone crashed with stunning force on the mail-clad head. The flexible coif was not enough protection against such a blow. The pliant links did not part, but they gave, and beneath them the striker felt the skull crunch under the blow. And with fully roused ferocity, the ex-slave struck again and again, until his

foeman lay motionless beneath him, blood seeping sluggishly from beneath the iron hood.

Then, panting, he rose, flinging aside the crude weapon, and glared down at the vanquished. Still shaken with fury and surprize, he shook his head bewilderedly. Then a sudden thought came to him, and he wondered that it had not occurred to him before. The horseman had come from the direction of the Moslem camp. Surely it had been impossible for him to have ridden past it unchallenged. He must have been in the camp itself. Then that meant that the fellow was somehow in league with the paynim, and again Roger shook his head. He had learned much of the ways of the East since he had ridden down the Danube in the vanguard of Peter the Hermit. Byzantine and Moslem were not always at each other's throats. Sometimes they dealt together secretly, to the confounding of the westerners. But Roger had never heard of a Crusader turning renegade – and this man, in the armor of a Cross Wearer, was no Greek.

Yielding to urgent necessity, Roger began to strip the dead. The dead man was clean shaven, with square-cut yellow hair. As far as appearances went, he might have been a Norman, but de Cogan remembered his alien accent. The ex-galley slave hurriedly donned the harness, settled the sword belt more firmly about his lean loins, and looked about for the iron cap which he placed on his tawny locks. All fitted him as if made for him. Inch for inch, the unknown attacker and he had been a perfect match. He stroked the hilt of the long broad sword, and felt like a man again, for the first time in months. The clink of the scabbard against his mail-sheathed thigh reminded him that he was again Sir Roger de Cogan, knight of the Cross, and one of England's surest swords.

No sound save the distant twittering of night birds disturbed the magic silence as he caught the charger which was calmly gazing at the edge of the woods. As he swung into the saddle, the long months of degradation and grinding toil fell away from him like a cast-off mantle, leaving only a grim determination to pay the debt he owed the worshippers of Muhammad. He smiled bleakly as he remembered the dying gurgles of Yusef ibn Zalim, but his face darkened as another visage rose before him, mocking in the moonlight – a lean hawk-face, crowned by a peaked helmet with a heron's feather. Prince Othman, son of Kilidg Arslan, the Red Lion of the Seljuks. The phantom mocked, but there would be another day, and scant in all other

things, Norman patience, when laid toward vengeance, was deep and abiding as the North Sea which bred it.

Roger left the spear where it lay, but he unslung the kite-shaped shield which hung at the saddle-bow, and wary as a wolf, plunged into the shadows of the trees, in the direction in which he had been going before the adventure. There was no insignia on the shield, but on the breast of the hauberk a strange emblem was worked in gold – something that looked like a falcon, and was unmistakably Grecian in its artistry.

The woods through which he rode were now as deserted as if he were the last man on earth. He followed the shore line as near as he dared, guiding his course by the distant lap of the waves, and the terrain was rolling and uneven. After some three hours, the lights of Constantinople blazed through the trees, as he mounted rises, then vanished as he dipped into hollows. It was, he calculated, somewhat past midnight when he rode into the outskirts of the city, which, separate from the greater metropolis and yet a part of it, sprawled along the northern bank of the Golden Horn. This was the quarters of the Venetian traders and other foreign merchants – straggling streets of carved wooden buildings and more substantial houses of stone. But before he reached the heart of the city, a wall halted him, and the watch at the gate hailed him. A torch in a mailed hand was reached down, to be brandished almost in his face, but before he could name himself, he saw a figure in black velvet lean from the wall and scrutinize him closely. There followed a few low words in Greek, and the gates swung open, to clang behind him as he reined his steed through. He prepared to ride away down the street, when the velveted figure darted out and caught his rein.

“Light! light!” exclaimed this person impatiently. “What is in your mind? Have you forgotten our master’s instructions? Here, Manuel, take this steed to the pier. Come with me, my lord Thorvald. Wait! Some one may recognize you! I had not known you, in those western trappings, and without your beard, but for the golden falcon on your hauberk. But some one might – take this silken scarf and mask your features with it.”

Sir Roger took it and wrapped in loosely about his coif, so that only his steely eyes were visible. It was apparent that he had been mistaken for the man he had slain. It was almost certain that he was going into danger, but it was as certain that if he declared his identity, he would just as quickly find himself in danger. The name of Thorvald stirred some faint recollection at

the back of the Norman's mind, and he instinctively touched the hilt of the sword at his girdle.

The guide led the way through narrow, deserted streets, until Roger knew that they were not far from piers that gave on to the strait, and halted at the door of a squat stone tower, evidently a relic of an earlier, ruder age. Some one looked out through a slit in the door.

"Open, fool!" hissed the man in velvet. "It is Angelus and the lord Thorvald the Smiter."

Hinges creaked as the door swung inward. Sir Roger followed, in a maze of fantastic speculations. Thorvald the Smiter – so that was the man he had battered to death with a stone in the glade. He had heard of the Norseman who was the grimmest swordsman in the Varangian Guards, that band of mercenaries, Northern slayers maintained by the Greeks. He had seen them about the palace of the Emperor – tall bearded men, in crested helmets and scarlet-edged cloaks and gilded mail. But what was a Varangian captain doing riding from a Turkish rendezvous in the night, clad in the mail of a Crusader?

Roger began to feel that he had stepped into a pit full of hidden snakes in the dark, but he drew the scarf closer about his features, and followed his guide through a short dark corridor into a small, dim-lit chamber. Some one was sitting in a great ornate chair, and to this figure the guide bowed almost to the floor, and withdrew, closing the door behind him. The Norman stood straining his eyes, and as they became accustomed to the dim candle-light, the form in the chair slowly took form. It was a short, stocky man who sat there, wrapped in a plain dark satin cloak which hid all other details of his costume. A featherless slouch hat and a mask lay on a table close at hand, arguing that the man had come in secrecy, fearing recognition. The knight's eyes were drawn to the other's face; the blue-black beard was carefully curled, the dark locks bound back from the broad forehead with a cloth-of-gold band; beneath it wide brown eyes gleamed with an innate vitality. Sir Roger started violently. In God's name, into what dark undercurrent of plot and intrigue had he fallen? The man in the chair was Alexis Comnene, emperor of the Byzantine empire.

"You have come quickly enough, Thorvald," said the emperor – and Sir Roger did not reply, being too busy wondering what mysterious matter had brought the emperor of the East from his marble-pillared palace in the dead of night to an obscure tower in the outer city.

“You ride with a loose rein. The messenger I sent did not tell you why I wished your presence?”

Sir Roger shook his head, at a venture. Alexis nodded.

“I told him to only bid you hasten here. But tell me – in your cruisings among the Black Sea corsairs, have they ever suspected your true identity?”

Again Sir Roger shook his head.

Alexis smiled.

“Sparing of speech as ever, old wolf! It is well. But just now I have work for you even more important than keeping an eye on the Moslem pirates. So I sent for you –

“Thorvald, since you went spying among the Turks, the hosts of the Franks have come and gone. They did not come as came Peter the Hermit and Gautier-sans-Avoir – rabbles of paupers and knaves. They came with war-horses, and wagon trains, cavaliers, and women, archers, pikemen and men-at-arms – all afire with zeal for recovering the Holy Sepulcher.

“First came Hugh of Vermandois, brother of the French king, in a ship with a few attendants. I feasted him royally, made him rich gifts, and persuaded him to take oath of allegiance to me. Then came others – St. Gilles of Provence, Godfrey of Bouillon and his brothers, and that devil Bohemund. All took oath of fealty except the stubborn Count of Provence – but I fear him not. He is zealous, and all for Jerusalem. Bohemund is another matter; he would cut the throat of Saint Paul, to gratify his ambition.

“They took Nicea for me, but I tricked them out of it, sending Manuel Butumites to make a secret treaty with the Turks, and now the city is garrisoned with my soldiers. Now the host marches southward, toward Palestine, and in the hills of Asia Minor, Kilidg Arslan will doubtless cut all their throats. Yet it may be that they will prevail against him. At least, they will deal him such great blows that he will be no more a menace for Byzantium for years to come. Nay, I fear him less than I fear that devil Bohemund, whom naught but luck helped me to defeat some twelve years ago when he came up out of Italy with Robert Guiscard.

“Thorvald, I sent for you because there is no man east of the Danube able to stand against you in sword-play. I have laid my plans well, yet Bohemund has slipped through my fingers before. With the corsairs you have been my eyes and my brain; now you must be my sword. Your task is to see that Bohemund does not leave the field alive, when Kilidg Arslan

comes up against the Franks. Hew not to the right nor to the left, but aim your strokes at him! This is my command – come what will, be the fortune of war what it may, who ever conquers or loses, lives or dies – KILL BOHEMUND!”

The emperor’s voice rang vibrantly in the chamber, his dark eyes flashed magnetically. Roger felt the force of the man’s dynamic personality like a physical impact.

“The Crusaders have already been a few days on the road,” said Alexis, “but they travel slowly, for their cavalry must keep pace with their wagons. It will be easy for you to pass beyond them and reach the Sultan before he joins battle, with the arrangements I have made. Your steed is already on a boat – a fresh steed, that is. The boat lies at the foot of the Green Pier – but Angelus will guide you thither. On the Asiatic side Ortuk Khan, he whom men call the Rider of the Wind, will meet you and lead you to the Sultan. Theodore Butumites is with Godfrey – ” he broke off suddenly, staring at Roger’s coif. “By Saint Paul,” said he, “there is fresh blood on your mail, Thorvald. Are you wounded?”

His mind full of whirling conjectures, Roger absently answered, “No.”

Instantly he was realized his mistake. Alexis started, and his keen eyes flared with suspicion. Every faculty of the man was as sharp as a whetted sword.

“That’s not Thorvald’s voice!” he snarled, and with a motion quick as a striking hawk, he ripped the scarf from the knight’s head. Both men leaped to their feet, the emperor recoiling with a scream.

“Spy! This is not Thorvald! Ho, the guard!”

Sir Roger’s sword flashed in the candle-light. Alexis leaped back, cat-like, and the blade sheared a lock of hair from his head as it hummed past. Instantly it seemed, the room swarmed with armed men, pouring in from each door. But the sight of the emperor fleeing desperately from the murderous attack of one they supposed to be a loyal servitor, momentarily froze their wits. Roger alone knew exactly what he had to do. No time for another stroke at the emperor who had sprung behind the great chair, and was shouting for his soldiers to cut down the impostor. The Norman wheeled toward the nearest door, where three men barred his way. The first went down, casque and skull cloven by the knight’s shearing stroke, and as the other two sprang in hacking, Sir Roger ducked and drove in headlong behind his shield. They reeled apart before the impact, and the Norman’s

bull-like drive carried him through the door and into the corridor. Recovering his balance in full flight, he raced down the short hallway. The outer door had been left unguarded. A quick fumbling at the chains and bolts and he was through, slammed the door in the faces of his yelling pursuers, and fled down the narrow street, cursing the clang of his mail-shod feet on the flags. He could not hope to evade his attackers, but ahead of him were the broad rows of green marble steps leading down to the waters edge, known as the Green Pier. He knew it of old. At the foot of the steps lay a broad boat, the steersman holding the craft to the lower step by a boat-hook thrust into a ring set in the marble. A rangy Arab horse was held quiet by grooms, and the brawny oarsmen gaped at his haste, as the knight ran down the steps and sprang into the boat.

“Give way!” he growled. The boatmen hesitated. Up the street came the clamor of pursuit. Steel clanked and torches tossed.

“Push off!” the boatmen saw the glimmer of naked steel in the knight’s mailed hand. They were unarmed laborers, not fighters. The steersman disengaged the boathook, and thrusting it against the steps, shoved powerfully. The heavy craft swung out into the current, and the rowers bent to their labor. They moved out into the shadowy star-mirroring reaches, and looking back, Sir Roger saw mailed figures racing up and down the piers, seeking a boat. But luck was with him; the wharfs had vanished in the distance before he heard, faintly the clack of oar-locks, and knew that the pursuit had taken to water.

The rowers, eyeing his dripping sword, bent to their oars as strongly as if he had been Alexis himself. The noise of the pursuing boats drew steadily nearer; they dogged his trail throughout that three-mile row, and the last few hundred yards he saw starlight glinting on helmets. But he was still a few score paces ahead when the low prow nudged the Asian shore. Springing to the saddle, he spurred the steed over the side, and plunged into the darkness.

There he had the advantage. His pursuers were not mounted, although it was quite possible that there might be steeds for them in the vicinity. He headed eastward at a long swinging gallop. In the darkness he was aware only of a vague shadowy landscape of low hills and flat stretches, with occasional blurs he took to be herders’ huts. Clouds had again obscured the stars, and the moon had long set. He drew rein, moving along almost at a walk, in the thick darkness, when suddenly he realized that there was a

movement about him. He heard the restive stamp of hoofs, and the jingle of trappings. A voice swore in a tongue alien yet hatefully familiar. Turks! He had ridden blindly into them in the darkness. They were all about him, hemming him in. Stealthily he reached for his sword, then a sibilant voice inquired, “Is it you, lord Thorvald?”

“Who else?” growled the knight, striving to assume the harsh accents of the Norseman.

“Strike a light,” muttered another voice. “Best be certain.”

There was the clink of flint on steel, and a tiny flame sprang up, illuminating a ring of bearded hawk-like faces – glinting on polished shoulder-plates, burnished helmets and ring-mail. The tall warrior who held the light leaned forward and eyed Sir Roger intently.

“There is the gold falcon, see?” said the Moslem. “Besides, look at the sword. The face of the Smiter is not so familiar to me that I would know it without the beard, but by Allah, I would recognize that blade anywhere!”

The light went out. Behind them, toward the shore, came a distant murmur as of many men. Torches tossed erratically. Roger felt the warriors about him stiffen suspiciously, and he heard the stir of scimitars in their sheaths.

“Who moves yonder?” asked the tall Moslem.

“Men the emperor sent to see that I got safely across,” answered Sir Roger. “He feared lest the Franks had left spies behind them.” Why do we linger here? It is not long until dawn.”

“True,” muttered the Turk. “And we were better safe in the hills before daylight. You came ahead of time. We were riding to the shore to meet you, when you rode in among us. We were lucky that we did not miss each other in this accursed dark. Ride in the midst of us, my lord.”

They moved off in a canter that grew into an easy swinging gallop that ate up the miles. As dawn rose, the band, like a flying band of desert ghosts, crossed the shoulder of a blue mountain and vanished in the hills beyond.

Daylight showed the night his companions – a score of hawk-like riders in the steel and gold and leather of the Seljuks. They rode like the wind, like men who do not have to spare their mounts, and he guessed that relays awaited them in the hills – for already they were beyond the eastern-most bounds of Alexis’ domain. They had not suspected him, and in that grim masquerade he had made no plans. He had but followed the trend of the tide, caught in the eddy, moving without volition of his own. He knew what

he would do if the opportunity rose, but for the moment he was helpless, with only half-facts at his command.

Indeed, the whole course of his life had lain along those lines, he thought morosely, to the tune of the drumming hoofs. Born in castle built up out of the ruins of a Saxon keep, almost exactly a year after the Battle of Hastings, Sir Roger's impulses and instincts had led him into such a tangle of affairs that he himself despaired of unravelling it. So, he departed from the land of his birth, not much in advance of soldiers sent by the exasperated king. Resentment toward his leige led him into the service of Duke Robert of Normandy, who was continually at logger-heads with his fox-like brother, but Roger's impatient spirit could not endure the procrastinating and wine-guzzling habits of the Duke, however generous and good-natured, and presently he found himself in the kingdom Norman swords had carved in southern Italy. He had ridden beside Tancred and shared the yellow fighting-cock's adventures, but Bohemund's everlasting ambition had palled on the English knight. The scene shifted to the Rhineland, where he was a participant in the gory climax of Duke Godfrey's feud with Rudolph of Swabia. Then came the dawn of the Crusades, Urban's trumpet-like invocation, and men selling their lands to buy horses to carry them eastward to salvation and the slaughter of the heathen.

The barons were gathering, but to the more penniless, they moved too slowly. Besides, there was an unexpressed doubt that there would be enough plunder to go around, once the great lords took the field. A horde of ploughmen, beggars and vagabonds rallied around Peter the Hermit, kissing the ground on which he walked, and getting their brains kicked out by his pessimistic jackass when they tried to pluck out the animal's grey hairs for holy relics. Peter emulated Urban and great was his magnetic power. To the gaunt fanatic likewise came a sprinkling of poverty-ridden knights and nobles, and the motley horde moved eastward down the Danube, singing hosannas and stealing pigs.

Among these poverty-ridden knights were Roger de Cogan and his brother-at-arms, Gautier sans Avoir – the Penniless. They tried to herd the horde, but they might as well have tried to herd the vultures of the Carpathians. The ravenous pilgrims, some eighty thousand strong, passed like a famine through the land of the Hungarians, fought with Alexis' outpost, fell on their knees to greet the spires of Constantinople, and settled themselves down, apparently, to devour all the food in the empire.

When they began to hack sheets of lead from the cathedral roofs to sell in the market place, Alexis in despair had them ferried across the Bosphorus, and there herds of them straggled away into the hills and managed to get themselves butchered by a raiding band of Turks. Gautier and his comrades, with more valor than discretion, sallied forth to rescue the miserable wretches, and ran into a veritable army of chanting heron-feathered riders. There died Gautier, on a heap of Turkish corpses, with his mad and gallant gentlemen, and Sir Roger, recovering his senses after a battle-axe, shattering on his casque, had dashed him into darkness, found himself bound with chains along with the remnant of his band, and being marched to Nicea, where he was sold to a tall lean vulture in steel and gold – the Arab Yusef ibn Zalim. His lean ship cruised the shores of the Black Sea, and up and down the Bosphorus from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean, and Roger saw sights both in the belly of the galley, and on the blood-stained deck, which haunted his dreams for the rest of his life. Yet these red visions were not able to dim one scene of horror and madness – his comrade Gautier, dying among the dead, and a lean scornful horseman in gilded mail and heron-feathered helmet, rearing his horse to bring down the hoofs crashing in the blood-stained dying face.

“Thus Othman, son of Kilidg Arslan, deals with infidels!” The scornful words rang in Roger de Cogan’s ears above the wash of waves, the splintering of the oars, and the red clamor of battle.

Now the English knight found himself galloping in company with Turkish reavers, in a grim masquerade, bound for a destination of which he knew nothing, save that it would doubtless bring him face to face with Prince Othman and his grim sire. He kept looking back for signs of pursuit; but if Alexis’ soldiers had followed, they had missed the trail.

At noon the riders came upon a squat tower in the hills, where food and drink, and fresh horses awaited them. They were in the outlying domain of Kilidg Arslan, the Red Lion of Islam, but as yet they had seen no villages, and only ruins, relics of ancient Roman rule. They spent scant time at their meal, but swung to the saddle and spurred up their mounts again.

And all through the hot dry summer afternoon they swung through the rugged hills at a gallop, pushing their horses unmercifully. Roger had kept his eyes open for out-riders of the Crusaders, or signs of their march, but he realized that they must be riding to the north of the Cross Wearers line of march. He asked no questions, nor did Ortuk Khan vouch-safe any

information; he rode along humming a song about a warrior whose skill at racing had gained for him the name of the Rider of the Wind. Roger sensed that this matter was the Seljuk's one weakness and vanity.

At moonrise they came again upon a relay of fresh horses in the hills, and again when the moon had set with a dusty courier, with whom Ortuk Khan talked long. Then he seated himself cross-legged on the ground, and signed for the men to prepare the meal.

"We are within striking distance of our objective," said he to Roger. "We have covered in hours what took the Cross Wearers days to traverse. We are now but three hours riding from the camp of the infidels. At dawn we will go forward, and join in the battle."

Roger had been puzzling in his mind as to how Alexis meant to wipe out Bohemund without destroying the rest of the Crusaders, and he ventured a question. "Repeat to me the trap the Red Lion has set for the Cross Wearers."

"Thus it is," answered Ortuk Khan readily. "Maimoun – Bohemund – and his people march ahead of the main body of the infidels. This night they lie in camp where the hills slope down into the plain of Doryleum, awaiting the coming up of Senjhil – St. Gilles – and the rest.

"But Alexis has given these others a guide to lead them astray. You see yonder peak which stands up in the moonlight above the other hills? Were you to ride due south on a straight line from that peak for five hours, you would come upon their camp.

"At dawn the Red Lion will ride in from the east, and crushed Maimoun and his iron men between his hands. Then he will move on Senjhil and the others and sweep them from the earth."

So Alexis was hand-and-glove with the Seljuk, as far as destroying Bohemund went; it had been obvious from the beginning. The traitorous guide mentioned by Ortuk Khan must be Theodore Butumites. Alexis had said the Greek was with St. Gilles. Roger looked long at the peak pointed out to him by the Turk, and fixed the land marks of the country firmly in his mind. Doryleum was three hours ride to the east; the camp of the others five hours ride to the south. On the eastern hills was crawling the first faint whitening of dawn. The Turks were bestirring themselves, saddling their horses and buckling their armor.

"Ortuk Khan," said Sir Roger casually, rising and laying his hand on the mane of the lean Turkoman steed which had been given him, "dawn is

lifting and we must quickly be on our way to join the Red Lion. But to breathe our steeds, I will race you to yonder knoll."

The Turk smiled. "It is still three hours hard riding to Doryleum, my lord, and our steeds will have much work to do after we reach the field."

"It is only a few hundred paces to the knoll," answered Sir Roger. "I have heard much of your skill at racing, and wished to have the honor of striving against you. Of course, there are many stones and boulders, and the footing is perilous. If you fear the attempt – "

Ortuk Khan's face darkened.

"That was ill said, oh man men call the Smiter. The folly of one makes fools of wise men. Yet mount, and I will do this childish thing."

They swung to their saddles, reined back their mounts even with each other, then at a word were off like bolts from a crossbow. The steel-clad warriors watched the race with interest.

"The footing is not so unstable as the Frank said," quoth one. "Look, their flight is as that of falcons. Ortuk Khan draws ahead."

"But the Smiter is close on his heels!" exclaimed another. "Look, they near the knoll – what is this? The Franks has drawn his sword! It flashes in the dawn-light – Allah!"

A yell of astounded fury rose from the lean warriors. Riding hard, the Norman had disappeared around the knoll; behind him a riderless horse raced away from the still form which lay in a crimson pool among the rocks. The Rider of the Wind had ridden his last race.

Shaking the red drops from his blade, Sir Roger gave the Turkoman horse the rein. He did not look back, though he strained his ears for the drum of pursuing hoofs. Guiding his course by the peak, he passed through the hills like a flying ghost. A short time after sunrise he crossed a broad track, with marks of broad wagon-wheels and the print of myriad feet and hoofs. The road of Bohemund. Among these prints were fresher hoof-prints, unshod, smaller. The prints of Turkish steeds. So the scouts of the Seljuks dogged the Norman column closely.

It was past the middle of the morning when Roger rode into the vast wide-flung camp of the Crusaders. His none too tender heart warmed at the familiar sights – knights with falcons on their wrists and giant hounds trailing them; yellow-haired women laughing under canopied pavilions; young esquires burnishing the armor of their lords. It was like a bit of Europe transferred to the bleak hills of Asia Minor. Two hundred thousand

people camped here, their fires and tents spreading out over the valley. Some of the pavilions had been taken down, some of the oxen harnessed to the wagons, but there was an air of waiting. Men-at-arms leaned on their pikes, pages wandered through the low bushes, whistling to their hounds. It was as if all the west had streamed eastward. Roger saw flaxen-haired Rhinelanders, black-bearded Spaniards and Provencals – French, Germans, Austrians. The clatter of a score of different tongues reached him.

The English knight reined through the throngs which stared at his dusty mail and sweaty horse, and halted before the pavilions whose richer colors betokened the leaders of the expedition. He saw them coming forth from their tents in full armor – Godfrey of Bouillon, and his brothers, Eustace and Baldwin of Boulogne – a stocky grey-bearded figure which must be Raymond of St. Gilles, Count of Toulouse. With them was a figure in ornate armor, the burnished plates contrasting with the grey mesh-mail coats of the westerners – Roger knew the man must be Theodore Butumites, brother of the new-made duke of Nicea, and officer of the Greek cataphracts.

The Turkoman charger snorted and tossed its head up and down, froth flying from the bit, as Roger slid to earth. Norman-like, the knight wasted no words.

“My lords,” he said bluntly, without preliminary salutation, “I have come to tell you that a battle is forward, and if you would take part, you had best hasten.”

“A battle?” It was Eustace of Boulogne, keen as a hunting hound on the scent. “Who fights?”

“Bohemund confronts the Red Lion, even as we stand here.”

The barons looked at each other uncertainly and Butumites laughed.

“The man is mad. How could Kilidg Arslan fall upon Bohemund without passing us? And we have seen no Turks.”

“Where is Bohemund?” asked Raymond.

“In the plain of Doryleum, some six hours hard riding to the north.”

“What!” It was an exclamation of unbelief. “How could that be? The lord Theodore has led us in a direct route, through valleys Bohemund missed. The Normans are somewhere behind us, and Theodore has sent his Byzantine scouts to find them and bring them hither, since it is evident that they have become lost in the hills. We are awaiting them before we take up the march.”

“It is you who are lost,” snapped Sir Roger. “Theodore Butumites is a spy and a traitor, sent by Alexis to lead you astray, while Kilidg Arslan crushes Bohemund – ”

“Dog, your life for that!” shouted the fiery Greek, striding forward, his hand on his sword. Roger fronted him grimly, gripping his own hilt, but the barons intervened.

“These are serious accusations you bring, friend,” said Godfrey. “What proofs have you of these words?”

“Why, in God’s name,” exclaimed Roger, “have you not seen that the Greek has swung further and further south? The Normans took the straighter course – it is you who have wandered from the route. Bohemund marched southeast by south – you have traveled due south. If you follow this course long enough, you may fetch the Mediterranean, but you will scarce come to the Holy Land!”

“Who is this rogue?” exclaimed Butumites angrily.

“Duke Godfrey knows me,” retorted the Norman. “I am Roger de Cogan.”

“By the saints!” exclaimed Godfrey, a smile lighting his worn face. “I had thought to recognize you, Godfrey! But you have changed – you have changed. My lords,” he turned to the others, “this gentleman is known to me aforetime – nay, he rode with me into the Lateran, when I – ”

He checked himself with the strange aversion he always felt toward speaking of what he considered his sacrilege in killing Duke Rudolph in the holy confines.

“But we know him not,” answered St. Gilles, with the caution that always ate at him like a worm in a beam. “And he comes with a strange tale – he would lead us on a wild chase, with naught but his own word – ”

“God’s thunder!” cried Roger, his short Norman patience exhausted. “Shall we gabble here while the Turks cut Bohemund’s throat? It is my word against the Greek’s, and I demand trial – the gauge of combat to decide between us!”

“Well spoken!” exclaimed Adhemar, the pope’s legate, a tall man who wore the chain mail of a knight, and was a warrior at heart. Such scenes warmed his heart, which was that of a warrior. “As mouth-piece of our Holy Father, I declare the righteousness of such course.”

“Well, and let us be at it!” exclaimed Roger, burning with impatience. “Choose your weapons, Greek!”

Butumites glanced over his dusty mail, and the light-limbed, sweat-covered steed, and smiled secretly.

“Dare you run a course with sharpened spears?”

This was a matter at which the Franks were more experienced than the Greeks, but Butmites was of larger boned frame than most of his race, well able to compete with the westerners in physical strength, and he had had experience, jousting with the western knights while they lay at Alexis’ court. He glanced at his giant black war-horse, accoutered with heavy trappings of silk, steel and lacquered leather, and smiled again. But Godfrey interposed.

“Nay, masters, this is but a sorry thing, seeing that Sir Roger has come hither on a weary steed, and that more fit for racing than fighting. Nay, Roger, you shall take my steed and lance, and my casque, too.”

Butumites shrugged his shoulders. In an instant his crushing advantage had been swept away, but he was still confident. At any rate, he preferred lances to sword-strokes, having no desire to encounter the stroke of the great sword that hung at Roger’s hip. He had fought Normans before.

Roger took the long heavy spear, and mounted the steed, held by Godfrey’s esquires, but refused the heavy helmet – a massive pot-like affair, without a movable vizor, but with a slit for the eyes. The joust had not then attained its later conventions and formalities; at that early date a lance-running was either a duel with sharpened weapons, or simply a form of training for more serious war-fare. A rude course had been formed by the crowd, pressing in on both sides, leaving a broad lane open. In this clear space the foes trotted apart for a short distance, wheeled couched their lances, and awaited the signal.

The trumpet blared and the great horses thundered toward each other. The shining black armor and plumed casque of the Byzantine contrasted strongly with the dusty grey armor and plain iron bassinet of the Norman. Roger knew that Butumites would aim his lance directly at his unprotected face, and he bent low, glaring at his foe above the upper rim of his heavy shield. The hosts gave tongue as the knights shocked together with a rending crash. Both lances shivered to the hand-grips, and the horses were hurled back on their haunches. But Roger kept his seat, though half-stunned by the terrible impact, while Butumites was dashed from his saddle as though by a thunder-bolt. He lay where he had fallen, his burnished steel-clad limbs crumpled in the dust, blood oozing from his cracked helmet.

Roger reined in his rearing steed and slid to earth dazedly, his head still ringing. The breaking lance of the Byzantine, glancing from the rim of his shield, had torn his bassinet from his head, and all but ripped loose the tendons of his neck. He advanced rather stiffly to the group which had formed about the prostrate Greek. The caque with its nodding plumes had been lifted off, and Butumites looked up at the faces above him with glazed eyes. It was evident that the man was dying. His breast-plate was shattered, and his whole breast-bone caved inward. Adhemar leaned above him, rosary in hand, muttering rapidly.

"My son, have you any confession?"

The dying lips worked, but only a dry rattle came from them. With a terrible effort the Greek muttered, "Doryleum – Kilidg Arslan – Bohemund – " blood gushed from his lips, and he stiffened, a still figure of burnished metal, steel-sheathed limbs falling awry.

Godfrey went into instant action.

"To horse!" he shouted. "A steed for Sir Roger! Bohemund needs aid and by the favor of God, he shall not call in vain!"

The throng yelped and the scene became a medly of confusion, knights mounting, men-at-arms buckling on their armor.

"Wait!" exclaimed St. Gilles. "We can not go racing over these hills, wagons and footmen – some one must guard the supplies – "

"Do you this thing, my lord Raymond," said Godfrey, a-fire with impatience. "Get the wagons under way, and follow with them and the footmen. My horsemen and I will push forward. Roger, lead the way!"

Untitled Synopsis

(The Slave-Princess)

Cormac FitzGeoffrey rides into a city that the Turkomans are looting. He arrives to late to share in the loot, but he captures an Arab slave girl, Zuleika, whose owner has just been murdered by a Turkoman. He kills the Turkoman and carries her off with him, riding to the castle of Sieur Amory. There he divulges his plan. He has noticed a striking resemblance between Zuleika and the daughter of Abdullah bin Kheram, the princess Zalda, who had been carried off three years before by Kurdish raiders, on the verge of her wedding to Khelru Shah, chief of the Seljuk Turks, who rules the hill-town of Kizil-hissar, the Red Castle. Amory keeps the girl with him, and Cormac rides to Kizil-hissar. He tells Khelru Shah that he has found the vanished princess, and that he will delivers her up to him for ten thousand pieces of gold. Khelru Shah threatens to keep him as hostage, but Cormac laughs at him, telling him that if he, Cormac, has not returned in a certain time, the princess's throat will be cut. Khelru Shah refuses to believe that the princess still lives, and decides to ride to Amory's castle with Cormac and see for himself. They set out with three hundred riders, and even before they set forth, one Ali, an Arab trader, who has spied upon their council, races southward on a swift camel. Meanwhile Amory has become somewhat interested in his fair captive, to the extent of attempting to ravish her, but refraining for some reason he himself cannot understand. Zuleika has fallen in love with her captor, but Amory, wild, and hardened by years of intrigue and battle, cannot believe himself in love with her. Cormac and Khelru Shah ride up to the castle wall and Amory displays Zuleika on the tower. Khelru Shah is puzzled; he finally decides that it is the princess Zalda, and demands a night to think the matter over. He retires with all his force a mile away and goes into camp, while Cormac enters the castle. Just at dark, a crippled beggar howls for admission at the castle gate and is allowed to enter and sleep in the castle hall. The Arab girl is locked into her chamber with a soldier on guard and Cormac and Amory drink and converse in another chamber. The walls are closely guarded in event of a surprize attack. When all the castle is silent, the crippled beggar rises stealthily, disclosing the countenance of an Egyptian right-hand man of Khelru Shah's. He steals to the girl's chamber, strangles her guard, enters, binds and gags her, and steals out of the castle. He conceals her in the stable, then slays the soldier guarding the postern gate and opens it, then

sets fire to the castle. Khelru Shah's men, who have stolen up on foot in the darkness, rush through the postern gate. Meanwhile, Cormac and Amory have quarrelled. Amory declares he will not let the girl go, and while the two are fighting hand to hand, a soldier rushes in shouting that the courtyard swarms with Turks. The handful of men in the castle cut their way out of the blazing hold, but are surrounded in the court-yard and about to be cut to pieces, when Abdullah bin Kheram rides up with a thousand men. The trader Ali has told him his daughter is captive there. Fighting ceases as all learn in wonder that Zuleika is indeed the princess Zalda. Khelru Shah is slain by Cormac who hacks his way through the Arabs and escapes, and Zalda makes known her love to Amory. The Sheikh gives his consent that they should marry and a powerful alliance is formed between the Arabs and Amory, for life.

Untitled Fragment

(The Slave-Princess)

Outside the clamor mounted deafeningly. The rasp of steel on steel mingled with yells of blood-lust and yells of wild triumph. The young slave girl hesitated and looked about the chamber in which she stood. There was resigned helplessness in her gaze. The city had fallen; the blood-drunk Turkomans were riding through the streets, burning, looting, slaughtering. Any moment might see the victorious savages running red handed through the house of her owner.

From another part of the house a fat merchant came running. His eyes were distended with terror, his breath came in gasps. He bore gems and worthless gew-gaws in his hands – belongings snatched blindly and at random.

"Zuleika!" His voice was the screech of a trapped weasel, "Open the door quickly, then bar it from this side – I will escape through the rear. Allah il Allah! The Turkish fiends are slaying all in the streets – the gutters run red – "

"What of me, master?" the girl asked humbly.

"What of you, hussy?" screamed the man, striking her heavily, "Open the door, open the door, I tell you – ahhhhhh!"

His voice snapped brittle as glass. Through an outer door came a wild and fearsome figure – a shaggy, ragged Turkoman whose eyes were the eyes of a mad dog. Zuleika in frozen terror saw the wide glaring eyes, the lanky hair, the short boar-spear gripped in a hand that dripped crimson.

The merchant's voice rose in a frenzied squeaking. He made a desperate dash across the chamber but the tribesman leaped like a cat on a mouse and one lean hand gripped the merchant's garments. Zuleika watched in dumb horror. She had reason to hate the man – reasons of outrage, punishment and indignity, but from the depths of her heart she pitied the howling wretch as he writhed and shrank from his fate. The boar-spear ripped upward; the screams broke in a fearful gurgle. The Turkoman stepped over the ghastly red thing on the floor and stalked toward the terrified girl. She shrank back, unspeaking. Long she had learned the cruelty of men and the uselessness of appeal. She did not beg for her life. The Turkoman gripped her by the breast of the single scanty garment she wore and she felt his wild beast eyes burn into her's. He was too far gone in the slaughter-lust for her to rouse another

desire in his wild soul. In that red moment she was only a living thing, pulsing and quivering with life, for him to still forever in blood and agony.

She sought to close her eyes but she could not. In a clear white light of semi-detachment she welcomed death, to end a road that had been hard and cruel. But her flesh shrank from the doom her spirit accepted and only her attacker's grasp held her erect. Grinning like a wolf he brought the keen point of the spear against her breast and a thin trickle of blood started from the tender skin. The tribesman sucked in his breath in fierce ecstacy; he would drive the blade home slowly, gradually, twisting it excruciatingly, glutting his cruelty with the agonized writhings and screamings of his fair victim.

A heavy step sounded behind them and a rough voice swore in an unfamiliar tongue. The Turkoman wheeled, beard bristling in a ferocious snarl. The half fainting girl stumbled back against a divan, her hand to her breast. It was a mailed Frank who had entered the chamber and to the girl's dizzy gaze he loomed like an iron clad giant. Over six feet in height he stood, and his shoulders and steel clad limbs were mighty. From his heels to his heavy vizorless helmet he was heavily armored and his sun-darkened, scarred features added to the sinister import of his appearance. There was no stain of blood on his mail and his sword hung sheathed at his girdle. The girl knew that he could be but one man – Cormac FitzGeoffrey, the Frankish outlaw who hunted at times with the Turkoman pack.

Now he strode ponderously toward them, growling a warning at the warrior, whose eyes burned with a feral light. The Turkoman spat a curse and leaped like a lean wolf, thrusting fiercely. A mail clad arm brushed the spear aside and almost with the same motion, Cormac caught the Turkoman's throat with his left hand in a vice-like grip, and with his clenched right struck his victim a mallet-like blow on the temple. Beneath the mailed fist, the tribesman's skull caved in like a gourd and Cormac let the twitching corpse fall carelessly at his feet. Zuleika stood silent, head bowed in submission, as resigned to this new master as to the other, but the Frank showed no signs of claiming his prey. He turned away, with a single casual glance at the girl, then stopped short as his brief gaze rested on her pale face. His eyes narrowed and he approached her. She stood before him, like a child before his overshadowing bulk.

He laid his mailed hand on her frail shoulder and her knees bent beneath the unconcious weight of it. She raised her head to look into his face. His

blazing blue eyes seemed to her like those of a jungle beast.

“Girl, how are you named?” he rumbled in Arabic.

“Zuleika, master,” she answered in the same language.

He was silent, as if he pondered. His scarred face was inscrutable but she caught the new glint in his volcanic eyes. Without a word he picked her up in his left arm as a man might take up a baby. His captive voiced no protest as he carried her out into the street. Kismet. No woman knew what Fate held in store for her and Zuleika had learned submission in a bitter school.

Smoke was blown through the streets in fitful gusts; the Turkomans were burning the city. Still rose the wails of terror and agony and the yells of gloating rage. Cormac stepped over the body of a Jew that lay in a crimson pool. Zuleika noted with a shudder that his fingers had been cut away – even in death the Jew clung to his pitiful treasures. A wave of nausea surged over her and she pressed her face against her captor’s mailed shoulder, shutting out the sights of horror. A sudden fierce shout caused her to look up again.

Cormac was striding toward a huge black stallion of savage mien that stood with reins hanging in the street, and a tall warrior in heron plumed helmet and gold-chased mail was running toward him, holding a dripping scimitar. Zuleika realized that the warrior desired her, and even in that moment felt that he was mad to dispute possession of a slave with the grim Frank, when so many women could be had for the taking. Cormac shifted her so his body shielded her, and drew his heavy sword. As the warrior leaped in the Frank struck as a lion strikes and the Turkoman’s head rolled in the bloody dust. Kicking aside the slumping body, Cormac reached his steed which reared and snorted with flaring nostrils at the scent of blood. But neither his steed’s restiveness nor his captive hampered the Frank who swung easily into the saddle and galloped toward the shattered gates.

The smoke, the blood and the clamor faded behind them and the upland desert closed in about them. Zuleika glanced up at the grim, inscrutable face of her new master and a strange whimsy crossed her mind. What girl has not dreamed of being borne away on the saddle bow of her prince of romance? So Zuleika had dreamed in other days. Long suffering had cleansed her of bitterness, but she wondered helplessly at the whim of chance. “On the saddle-bow she was borne away” but her garments were not the robes of a princess but the shift of a slave, not to the lilt of harps she rode, but the slavering howls of horror and slaughter, and her captor was not

the prince of her childish dreams but a grim outlaw, stark and savage as the mountain land that bred him.

Chapter 2

The castle of the Sieur Amory set in the midst of a wild land. Built originally by Crusaders, it had fallen to the Seljuks, from whom it had again been captured by the craft and desperate courage of its present owner. It was one of the few waste-land hold that remained to the Franks, an outpost that rose boldly in hostile land. Leagues lay between Amory's keep and the nearest Christian castle. South lay the desert. To the east, across the sands loomed the wild mountains wherein lurked savage foes.

Night had fallen and Amory sat in an inner chamber listening attentively to his guest. Amory was tall, rangy and handsome with keen grey eyes and golden locks. His garments had once been rich and costly but now they were worn and faded. The gems that had once adorned his sword hilt were gone. Poverty was reflected in his apparel as well as in the castle itself, which was barren beyond the wont of even the feudal castles of that rude day. Amory lived by plunder, as a wolf lives, and like a desert wolf, his life was lean and hard.

He sat on the rude bench, chin on fist and gazed at his guests. His was one of the few castles open to Cormac FitzGeoffrey. There was a price on the outlaw's head and the slim holdings of the Franks in Outremer were barred to him, but here beyond the border none knew what went on in the isolated hold.

Cormac had quenched his thirst and satisfied his hunger with gigantic draughts of wine and huge bits of meat torn by his strong teeth from a roasted joint, and Zuleika had likewise eaten and drunk. Now the girl sat patiently, knowing that the warrior discussed her, but not understanding their Frankish speech.

"And so," Cormac was saying, "when I heard the Turkomans had laid seige to the city, I rode hard to come up to it, knowing that it would not long withstand them, what with that fat fool of a Yurzed Beg commanding the walls. Well, it fell before I could arrive and when I came into it, the desert men had stripped it bare – the lucky ones had all the loot in sight and the others were scorching the toes of the citizens to make them give up their hidden wealth – but I did find this girl."

"What of her, then?" asked Amory curiously, "She is pretty – dressed in costly apparel she might even be beautiful. But after all, she is only a half

naked slave. No one will pay you much for her."

Cormac grinned bleakly and Amory's interest quickened. He had had much dealings with the Irish warrior and he knew when Cormac smiled, things were afoot.

"Did you ever hear of Zalda, the daughter of the Sheikh Abdullah bin Khor, chief of the Roualli?"

Amory nodded and the girl, catching the Arabic words, looked up with sudden interest.

"She was about to be married, three years ago," said Cormac, "To Khalru Shah, chief of Kizil-hissar, but a roving band of Kurds kidnapped her, and since then no word has been heard of her. Doubtless the Kurds sold her far to the East – or cut her throat. You never saw her? I did – these Bedouin women go unveiled. And this Arab girl, Zuleika, is enough like the princess Zalda to be her sister, by Crom!"

"I begin to see what you mean," said Amory.

"Khelru Shah," said Cormac, "will pay a mighty ransom for his bride. Zalda was of royal blood – marrying her meant alliance with the Roualli – the Sheikh is more powerful than many princes – when he summons his war-men, the hoofs of three thousand steeds shake the desert. Though he dwells in the felt tents of the Bedouin, his power is great, his wealth is great. No dowry was to go with the princess Zalda, but Khelru Shah was to pay for the privilege of wedding her – of such pride are these wild Rouallas.

"Keep the Arab girl here with you. I will ride to Kizil-hissar and lay my terms before the Turk. Keep her well concealed and let no Arab see her – she might be mistaken for Zalda, indeed, and if Abdullah bin Kheram gets wind of it, he might bring up against us such a force as to take the castle by storm.

"By continuous riding I can reach Kizil-hissar in three days; I will waste no more than a day in disputing with Khelru Shah. If I know the man, he will ride back with me, with several hundred men. We should reach this castle not later than four days after we depart from the hill-town. Keep the gates close barred while I am away, and ride not far afield. Khelru Shah is as subtle and treacherous – "

"Yourself," finished Amory with a grim smile.

Cormac grunted. "When we come, we will ride up to the walls. Then bring you the Arab slave upon the walls of the tower – somewhere you must contrive to find clothing more suited to a captive princess. And

impress upon her that she must bear herself, at least while on the wall, with less humility. The princess Zalda was proud and haughty as an empress and bore herself as if all lesser beings were dust beneath her white feet. And now I ride."

"In the midst of the night?" asked Amory, "Will you not sleep in my castle and ride forth at dawn?"

"My horse is rested," answered Cormac, "I never weary. Besides, I am a hawk that flies best by night."

He rose, pulling his mail coif in place and donning his helmet. He took up his shield which bore the symbol of a grinning skull. Amory looked at him curiously, and though he knew the man of old, he could not but wonder at the wild spirit and self-sufficiency that enabled him to ride by night across a savage and hostile land, into the very strong hold of his natural foes. Amory knew that Cormac FitzGeoffrey was outlawed by the Franks for slaying a certain nobleman, that he was fiercely hated by the Saracens as a hold, and that he had half a dozen private feuds on his hands, both with Christian and Moslem. He had few friends, no followers, no position of power. He was an outcast who must depend on his own wit and prowess to survive. But these things sat lightly on the soul of Cormac FitzGeoffrey; to him they were but natural circumstances. His whole life had been one of incredible savagery and violence.

Amory knew that conditions in Cormac's native land were wild and bloody, for the name of Ireland was a term for violence all over Western Europe. But just how war-shaken and turbulent those conditions were, Amory could not know. Son of a ruthless Norman adventurer on one hand, and a fierce Irish clan on the other, Cormac FitzGeoffrey had inherited the passions, hates and ancient feuds of both races. He had followed Richard of England to Palestine and won a red name for himself in the blind melee of that vain Crusade. Returning again to Outremer to pay a debt of gratitude, he had been caught in the blind whirlwind of plot and intrigue and had plunged into the dangerous game with a fierce zest. He rode alone, mostly, and time and again his many enemies thought him trapped, but each time he had won free, by craft and guile, or by the sheer power of his sword arm. For he was like a desert lion, this giant Norman-Gael, who plotted like a Turk, rode like a Centaur, fought like a blood-mad tiger and preyed on the strongest and fiercest of the outland lords.

Full armed he rode into the night on his great black stallion, and Amory turned his casual attention to the slave girl. Her hands were soiled and roughened with menial toil, but they were slender and shapely. Somewhere in her veins, decided the young Frenchman, ran aristocratic blood, that showed in the delicate rose leaf texture of her skin, in the silkiness of her wavy black hair, in the deep softness of her dark eyes. All the warm heritage of the Southern desert was evident in her every motion,

"You were not born a slave?"

"What does it matter, master?" she asked, "Enough that I am a slave now. Better be born to the whips and chains than broken to them. Once I was free; now I am thrall. Is it not enough."

"A slave," muttered Amory, "What are a slave's thought? Strange – it never before occurred to me to wonder what passes in the mind of a slave – or a beast, either, for that matter."

"Better a man's steed, than a man's slave, master," said the girl.

"Aye," he answered, "For there is nobility in a good horse."

She bowed her head and folded her slender hands, unspeaking.

Chapter 3

Dusk shadowed the hills when Cormac FitzGeoffrey rode up to the great gate of Kizil-hissar, the Red Castle, which gave its name to the town it guarded and dominated. The guardsmen, lean, bearded Turks with the eyes of hawks, cursed in amazement.

"By Allah, and by Allah! The wolf has come to put his head in the trap! Run, Yusef, and tell our lord, Suleyman Bey, that the infidel dog, Cormac, stands before the gates."

"Ho there, you upon the walls!" shouted the Frank. "Tell your chief that Cormac FitzGeoffrey would have speech with him. And make haste, for I am not one to waste time in dallying."

"Hold him in parley but a moment," muttered a Moslem, crouching behind a bastion, and winding his cross-bow – a ponderous affair captured from the Franks, "I'll send him to dress his shield in Hell."

"Hold!" this from a bearded, lean old hawk whose eyes were fierce and wary, "When this chief rides boldly into the hands of his enemies, be sure he has secret powers. Wait until Suleyman comes." To Cormac he called curteously, "Be patient, mighty lord; the prince Suleyman Bey has been sent for and will soon be upon the walls."

"Then let him come in haste," growled Cormac, who was in no more awe of a prince than he was of a peasant, "I will not await him long."

Suleyman Bey came upon the great walls and looked down curiously and suspiciously upon his enemy.

"What want ye, Cormac FitzGeoffrey?" he asked, "Are you mad, to ride alone to the gates of Kizil-hissar? Have you forgotten there is feud between us? That I have sworn to sever your neck with my sword?"

"Aye, so you have sworn," grinned Cormac, "And so has sworn Abdullah bin Kheram, and Ali Bahadur, and Abdallah Mirza the Kurd. And so, in past years and in another land, swore Sir John Courcey, and the clan of the O'Donnells and Sir William le Botelier, yet I still wear my head firmly on my shoulders.

"Harken till I tell you what I have to say. Then if you still wish my head, come out of your stone walls and see if ye be man enough to take it. This concerns the princess Zalda, daughter of Sheikh Abdullah bin Kheram – on whose name, damnation!"

Suleyman Bey stiffened with sudden interest; he was a tall, slender man, young, and handsome in a hawk-like way. His short black beard set off his aristocratic features and his eyes were fine and expressive, with shadows of cruelty lurking in their depths. His turban was scaled with silver coins and adorned with heron plumes, and his light mail was crusted with golden scales. The hilt of his slender, silver chased scimitar was set with gleaming gems. Young but powerful was Suleyman Bey, in the hill town upon which he had swooped with his hawks a few years before and made himself ruler. Six hundred men of war he could bring to battle, and he lusted for more power. For that reason he had wished to ally himself with the powerful Roualla tribe of Abdullah bin Kheram.

"What of the princess Zalda?" he asked.

"She is my captive," answered Cormac.

Suleyman Bey started violently, his hand gripped his hilt, then he laughed mockingly.

"You lie; the princess Zalda is dead."

"So I thought," answered Cormac frankly, "But in the raid on the city, I found her captive to a merchant who knew not her real identity, she having concealed it, fearing lest worse evil come to her."

Suleyman Bey stood in thought a moment, then raised his hand.

"Open the gates for him. Enter, Cormac FitzGeoffrey, no harm shall come to you. Lay down your sword and ride in."

"I wore my sword in the tent of Richard the Lion-hearted," roared the Norman, "When I unbuckle it in the walls of my foes, it will be when I am dead. Unbar those gates, fools, my steed is weary."

Within an inner chamber of silk and crimson hangings, crystal and gold and teak-wood, Suleyman Bey sat listening to his guest. The young chief's face was inscrutable but his dark eyes were absorbed. Behind him stood, like a dark image, Belek the Egyptian, Suleyman's right-hand man, a big, dark powerful man with a satanic face and evil eyes. Whence he came, who he was, why he followed the young Turk none knew but Suleyman, but all feared and hated him, for the craft and cruelty of a black serpent was in the abysmal brain of the Egyptian.

Cormac FitzGeoffrey had laid aside his helmet and thrown back his mail coif, disclosing his thick, corded throat, and his black, square cut mane. His volcanic blue eyes blazed even more fiercely as he talked.

“Once the princess Zalda is in your hands you can bring the Sheikh to terms. Instead of paying him a great price for her, you can force him to pay you a dowery. He had rather see her your wife, even at the cost of much gold, than your slave. Once married to her, then, he will join forces with you. You will have all that you planned for three years ago, in addition to a rich dowery from the Sheikh.”

“Why did you not ride to him instead of to me?” abruptly asked Suleyman.

“Because you have such things as we desire, my friend and I. Abdullah is more powerful than you, but his treasure is less. Most of his belongings consist of cattle – horses – arms – tents – fields – the belongings of a nomad chief. Here in this castle you have chests of golden coins looted from caravans and taken as ransom for captive knights. You have gems – silver – silks – rare spices – jewelry. You have what we desire.”

“And what proof have I that you are not lying?”

“Ride with me tomorrow,” grunted Cormac, “To the castle of my friend.”

Suleyman laughed like a wolf snarling.

“You would lead us into a trap,” said the Egyptian.

“Bring three hundred men with you, bring as many as you like, the whole band of thieves,” said Cormac, “Where do you think I would get enough warriors to trap your whole host?”

“Where is she being held?” asked the Seljuk.

“In the castle of the Sieur Amory, three, four days ride to the west,” said Cormac, “You could never take it by assault.”

“I am not sure,” muttered Suleyman, “The lord Amory has only some forty men-at-arms.”

“But the castle is impregnable.”

“So I have heard.”

The Egyptian’s eyes narrowed.

“We might seize you and hold you for ransom,” he suggested, “And force the Sieur Amory to return the girl.”

Cormac laughed savagely and mockingly.

“Amory would laugh at you and tell you to cut my throat and be damned, or he would cut the throat of the girl as it struck him. Besides, though I am in your castle, surrounded by your warriors, I am not entirely helpless. Seek to take me and I will flood these walls with blood before I die.”

It was no idle boast as the Moslems well knew.

“Enough!” Suleyman made an impatient gesture, “You were promised safety – what’s that?”

A commotion had arisen without; a scuffling, shouts, threats and maledictions in the Arab tongue. The outer door was thrust open and a bearded Turk who had been guarding the door entered, dragging a struggling victim whose beard bristled with wrath. He clung to a pack from which spilled various trinkets and ornaments.

“I found this dog sneaking about in an adjoining chamber, master,” rumbled the guardsman, “Methinks he was eavesdropping. Shall I not strike off his head?”

“I am Ali bin Nasru, an honest merchant!” shouted the Arab angrily and fearfully, “I am well known in Kizil-hissar! I sell wares to shahs and sheikhs and I was not evesdropping. Am I a dog to spy upon my patron? I was seeking the great chief Suleyman Bey to spread my goods before him!”

“Best cut out his tongue,” growled Belek, “He may have heard too much.”

“I heard nothing!” clamored Ali, “I have but just come into the castle!”

“Beat him forth,” snapped Suleyman Bey in irritation, “Shall I be pestered by a yapping cur? Lash him out and if he comes again with his trash, strip him and hang him up by his feet in the market-place for the children to pelt with stones. Cormac, we ride at dawn, and if you have tricked me, make your peace with Allah!”

“And if you seek to trick me,” snarled Cormac, “make your peace with the Devil for you will swiftly meet him.”

It was past midnight when a form climbed warily down a rope let down from the outer wall of the town. Hurriedly making his way down the slopes, the man came soon upon a thicket where was securely hidden a swift camel and a bulky pack – for the man was not one to trust all his belongings in a town ruled by Turks. Recklessly casting aside the pack, the man mounted the camel and fled southward.

Chapter 4

Amory rested his chin on his fist and gazed broodingly at the Arab girl, Zuleika. In the past days he had found his eyes straying often to his slender captive. He wondered at her silence and submission, for he knew that at some time in her life, she had known a higher position than that of a slave. Her manners were not those of a born serf; she was neither impudent nor servile. He guessed faintly at the fierce and cruel school in which she had been broken – no, not broken, for there was a strange deep strength in her that had not been touched, or if touched, only made more pliable.

She was beautiful – not with the passionate, fierce beauty of the Turkish women who had lent him their wild love, but with a deep, tranquill beauty, of one who's soul has been forged in fierce fires.

"Tell me how you came to be a slave," the voice was one of command and Zuleika folded her hands in acquiesence.

"I was born among the black felt tents of the south, master, and my childhood was spent upon the desert. There all things are free – in my early girlhood I was proud, for men told me I was beautiful, and many suitors came to woo me. But there came others, too – men who wooed with naked steel and me they carried off.

"They sold me to a Turk, who soon wearied of me and sold me again to a Persian slave-dealer. Thus I came into the house of the merchant of the city, and there I toiled, a slave among the lowest slaves. My master once offered me my freedom if I would return his love but I could not. My body was his; my love he could not shackle. So he made of me his drudge."

"You have learned deep humilty," commented Amory.

"By scourge and shackle and torture and toil I have learned, master," she said.

"Do you know what we mean to do with you?" he asked bluntly. She shook her head.

"Cormac thinks you resemble the princess Zalda," said Amory, "And it is our intention to cheat Suleyman Bey with you. We will show you to him on the wall, and I think he will pay a high price for you. When we have delivered you to him, you will have your chance. Play your cards well and perchance you may bewitch him, so when he learns of the trickery, he will not put you aside."

Again Amory's eyes swept over her slim form. A pulse began to thrum in his temple. For the time being, she was his; why should he not take her, before he gave her into the arms of Suleyman Bey? He had learned that what a man wants he must take. With a single long stride he reached her and swept her into his arms. She made no resistance, but she averted her face, drawing her head back from his fierce lips. Her dark eyes looked into his with a deep hurt and suddenly he felt ashamed. He released her and turned away.

"There are some garments I bought from a wandering band of gypsies," he said abruptly, "Put them on; I hear a trumpet."

Across the desert a distant trumpet was faintly sounding. Amory had his men in full armor lining the walls, weapons in hand, when the horsemen rode up to the castle gate, which was flanked by a tower.

Amory hailed them. He saw Suleyman Bey in heron plumed helmet and gold scaled mail, sitting his black mare. Close behind him sat Belek the Egyptian on a bay horse, and beside the chief, Cormac FitzGeoffrey on his great stallion. And Amory grinned. Was it not strange to see the man riding in the company of those who had sworn to cut his throat? Some three hundred riders were ranked behind the chief.

"Ha, Amory," said Cormac, "Fetch forth the princess – let her be shown upon the wall of the tower that Suleyman Bey be convinced; he thinks us liars, by the hoofs of the Devil!"

Amory hesitated, as a sudden revulsion shook him, then with a shrug of his shoulders he made a gesture to his men-at-arms. Zuleika was escorted out upon the wall above the gate and Amory gasped. Rich clothes had wrought a transformation in the slave girl; indeed she wore them as if she had never worn the flimsy rags of a serf. She did not carry herself with the haughty pride of a princess, thought Amory, but there was a certain quiet dignity about her, a certain proud humility that many of royal blood might well copy.

Suleyman Bey gasped also; he gazed at her in bewilderment and reined closer.

"By Allah!" he said in amazement, "Zalda! Is it she? No – yes – by Asrael, I cannot say! She does not carry her chin as she did, if it be she, and yet – yet – by the gods, it must be she!"

"Of a surety it is the princess Zalda," rumbled Cormac, "By Satan, do you think there is no faith in Franks? Well, chief, what say you? Is she

worth ten thousand pieces of gold to you?”

“Wait,” answered the Turk, “I must have time to consider. This girl is alike the princess Zalda as can be – yet her whole bearing is different – I must be convinced. Let her speak to me.”

Amory nodded to Zuleika, who gave him a pitiful look, then raising her voice, said: “My lord, I am Zalda, daughter of Abdullah bin Kheram.”

Again the Turk shook his hawk-like head.

“The voice is soft and musical like Zalda’s, but the tone is different – the princess was used to command and her tone was imperious.”

“She has been a captive,” grunted Cormac, “Three years of captivity can change even a princess.”

“True – well, I will ride to the spring of Mechmet which lies something more than a mile away, and there camp. Tomorrow I will come to you again and we will talk on the matter. Ten thousand pieces of gold – a high price to pay, even for the princess Zalda.”

“Good enough,” grunted Cormac. “I’ll remain at the castle – and mark you, Suleyman – no tricks. At the first hint of a night onset we cut Zalda’s throat and throw her head to you. Mark!”

Suleyman nodded absent mindedly and rode away at the head of his riders, in deep converse with the dark faced Belek. Cormac rode in through the gate which was instantly barred and bolted behind him, and Zuleika turned to go into her chamber. Her head was bent, her hands folded; again she had assumed the manner of the slave. Yet she paused a moment before Amory and in her dark eyes was a deep hurt as she said: “You will sell me to Suleyman, my lord?”

Amory flushed darkly – not in years had the blood thus suffused his face. He sought to reply and groped for words. Unconciously his mailed hand sought her slim shoulder, half caressingly. Then he shook himself and spoke harshly because of the strange conflicting emotions within him: “Go to your chamber, wench; what affair of yours is it what I do?”

And as she went, head sunk on her breast, he stood looking after her, clenching his mailed fists until the fingers cracked, and cursing himself bewilderedly.

Chapter 5

Cormac FitzGeoffrey and Amory sat in an inner chamber, though the hour was late. Cormac was in full armor, except for his helmet, as was Amory. The mail coifs of both men were drawn back upon their shoulders, disclosing Amory's yellow locks and Cormac's raven mane. Amory was silent, moody; he drank little, talked less. Cormac on the other hand, was in an mood of deep satisfaction. He drank deep and his gratification led him into a reminiscent mood.

"Wars and massed battles I have seen in plenty," said he, lifting his great goblet, "Aye – I fought in the battle of Dublin when I was but eight years old, by the hoofs of the Devil! Miles de Cogan and his brother Richard held the city for Strongbow – men of iron in an iron age. Hasculf Mac Turkill, king of Dublin, who had been driven into the Orkneys, came sailing up the strand with sixty-five ships – galleys of the heathen Norsemen, whose chief was the berserk Jon the Mad – and mad he was, by the hoofs of Satan! So Hasculf came back to win his city again, with his Danes and Dano-Irish, and his allies from Norway and the Isles.

"Word of the war came into the west, where I was a boy running half naked on the moors, in the land of the O'Briens. We had a weapon-man whose name was Wulfgar and he was a Norseman. 'I will strike one more blow for the sea-people,' he said, and he went across the bogs and the fens as a wolf goes, and I went with him with my boy's bow, for the urge of wandering and blood-letting was already upon me. So we came upon Dublin strand just as the battle was joined. By Satan, the Norsemen drove the Normans back into the city and were shattering the gates when Richard de Cogan made a sortie from the postern gate and fell upon them from the rare. Whereupon Sir Miles sallied from the main gates with his knights and the ravens fed deep! By Satan, there the axes drank and the swords failed not of glutting!

"So Wulfgar and I came into the battle and the first wounded man I saw was an English man-at-arms who had once crushed my ear lobe to a pulp so that the blood flowed over his mailed fingers, to see if he could make me cry out – I did not cry out but spat in his face, so he struck me senseless. Now this man knew me and called me by name, gasping for water. 'Water is it?' said I, 'Its in the icy rivers of Hell you'll quench your thirst!' And I

jerked back his head to cut his throat, but before I could lay dirk to gullet, he died. His legs were crushed by a great stone and a spear had broken in his ribs.

“Wulfgar was gone from me now and I advanced into the thick of the battle, loosing my arrows with all the might of my childish muscles, blindly and at random, so I do not know if I did scathe or not, or to whom, for the noise and shouting confused me and the smell of blood was in my nostrils, and the blindness and fury of my first massed battle upon me.

“So I came to the place where Jon the Mad was leagued with a few of his Vikings by the Norman knights – by Saint John, I never saw a man strike such blows as this berserk struck! He fought half naked and without mail or shield, and neither buckler nor armor could stand before his axe. And I saw Wulfgar – on a heap of dead he lay, still gripping a hilt from which the blade had snapped in a Norman knight’s heart. He was passing swiftly, his life ebbing from him in thick crimson surges but he spoke to me, faintly and said: ‘Bend your bow, Cormac, against the big man in chain mail armor.’ And so he died and I knew he meant Miles de Cogan.

“But at that moment Jon, bleeding from a hundred wounds, struck a blow that hewed off a knight’s leg at the hip, though cased in heavy mail, and the axe haft splintered in the Viking’s hand, and Miles de Cogan gave him his death stroke. Now all the Norsemen were dead or fled, and the men-at-arms dragged King Hasculf Mac Torkill before Miles de Cogan, who had his head severed on the spot. Now that sight maddened me, for though I loved not the Dane, I hated the Normans more, and running forward across the torn corpses, I bent my bow against Miles de Cogan. It was my last arrow and it splintered on his breast plate. A man-at-arms caught me up and held me high for Miles to view, while I cursed him in Gaelic and broke my milk teeth on his mail-clad wrist.

“ ‘By Saint George,’ said Miles, ‘It’s Geoffrey the Bastard’s Irish wolf-cub!’

“ ‘Crush him,’ said Richard de Cogan, ‘He’s half Gael – he’ll make a wolf for the O’Briens.’

“ ‘He’s half Geoffrey,’ said Miles, ‘He’ll make a good soldier for the king.’

“Well, both were right, but Miles came to curse the day he spared me. When I met him again in battle, years later, I gave him a wound that marked him for life.

“Barren fighting, in a barren land. By Satan, it seems though that now we are to be rewarded for our zeal. Did you station all the men-at-arms on the walls? It’s a dark, star-less night and we must beware of Suleyman Bey. Ha, we’ve cozened him! We are as good as richer by ten thousand gold pieces! Then you can rebuild this castle – hire more men-at-arms – buy armor and weapons. As for me, I’ll gather together a band of cut-throat ruffians and fare east in quest of some fat city to loot.”

“Cormac,” Amory’s eyes were dull and troubled, “What think you that Suleyman Bey will do with the girl Zuleika when he finds we’ve tricked him? Will he not slay her in his anger?”

“Not he,” Cormac drank deep, “He’ll use her to trick old Abdullah bin Kheram as we’ve tricked him. If the girl plays her cards right, she may be a queen yet.”

“Cormac,” said Amory abruptly, “I cannot do it.”

The Norman glared at him in bewilderment.

“What are you talking about?”

Amory spread his hands helplessly. “I am sorry. I realized it while she was on the wall – I cannot let this girl go – I love her – ”

“What!” exclaimed Cormac, completely dumfounded, “You mean you will keep her – not give her up to Suleyman Bey – why – !”

“I love her,” said Amory doggedly, “That is the only excuse I can give.”

Blue sparks of Hell’s fire began to flicker in Cormac’s eyes. His mailed fingers closed on the goblet and crunched it into ruin.

“You’d trick me, eh?” he roared, “You’d cheat me! Its wolf bite wolf, is it, with your damned lust? You French dog, I’ll send you to pare the Devil’s nails!”

Amory reached swiftly for his sword as Cormac lunged from his seat, but the giant Irishman plunged full at his throat, splintering the heavy table to match-wood. Before the young Frenchman could clear his blade, the impact of Cormac’s hurtling mail-clad body knocked him staggering and he was fighting desperately to keep the Norman’s iron fingers from his throat. One of Cormac’s hands had locked like a vise in a fold of Amory’s mail at his neck, barely missing the throat and the other hand snapped for a death-hold. Amory’s face was pale for he had seen Cormac tear out a giant Turk’s throat with his naked fingers and he knew that once those iron hands closed on his gullet, no power on earth could loosen them before they tore out the life that pulsed beneath.

About the room they fought and wrestled, those two great, mailed fighting men, in a strange, silent battle. Cormac made no attempt to draw steel and Amory had no time to do so. With all his skill, swiftness and power, he was fighting a losing fight to keep clear of those terrible, clutching hands. Amory struck with all his power, driving his clenched, iron guarded fist full into Cormac's face and blood spattered, but the terrific blow did not check the Norman in the slightest – Amory did not even think Cormac blinked. They crashed headlong into the ruins of the table and as they fell, close-clinched, Cormac roared short and thunderous, as his fingers locked at last in the hold he had sought. Instantly Amory's head began to swim and the candle-light went bloody to his distended gaze. Cormac's fingers were sunk in the loose folds of his coif which, thrown back from his head, lay loosely about his neck, and only this saved him from instant death, but even so he felt his senses going. He tore and ripped futiley at Cormac's wrists; his head was bent back at an excruiating angle – his neck was about to snap – there came a swift rush of feet in the corridor without – a wild eyed man-at-arms burst into the chamber.

"My lords – masters – the paynim – they are within the wall and the castle burns!"

Chapter 6

The sounds of the castle faded as the guardsmen took up their posts and the rest composed themselves for sleep. In the great hall the beggar stirred; from his rags eyes strangely unsuited to a beggar glinted; eyes like a baskilisk's. With a swift motion he rose, throwing off his filthy, tattered garments, revealing the mephistophelean countenance and pantherish form of Belek the Egyptian. Clad only in a striped loin cloth and with a long dagger in his hand, he stole through the great hall and up the winding stair like a ghost.

Over all the castle silence reigned; before Zuleika's door the sleepy man-at-arms yawned and leaned on his pike drowsily. What use for a guard before an inner chamber? What pagan could win through the walls without rousing the whole force of the defenders? The guard did not hear the naked feet that stole noiselessly along the flags. He did not see the dusky figure that glided behind him. But he felt suddenly an iron arm encircle his throat strangling the startled yell that sought to rise to his lips, he felt the momentary agony of a hard driven blade that pierced his heart, and then he felt no more.

Belek eased the limp body to the floor and swiftly detached the keys from the belt. He selected one and opened the door, working with speed but silence. He slipped inside, closing the door.

Zuleika wakened with the realization that some one was in her chamber, but in the utter darkness she could see no one. But Belek could see like a cat in the dark. Zuleika felt a sudden hand clapped over her mouth and as she instinctively lifted her hands to ward off that attack, her slim wrists were pinioned together.

"Keep still, princess," hissed a voice in the gloom, "If you scream, you die."

The hand was withdrawn from her lips and Zuleika felt her hands being bound; next a gag was placed in her mouth. Belek the Egyptian had his own ideas about handling women. He had been sent to rescue Zuleika, yes; but he knew that women quite often prefer not to be rescued from their captors and he was taking no chances that the girl might prefer to remain with her present masters than to ride away with Suleyman Bey. Belek did not intend that a woman's scream should bring him to his doom.

He lifted his slender captive and carrying her carefully over one shoulder, stole down the corridor cautiously, dagger ready. He descended the stair and stole through the great kitchin. He heard the cook snoring in the pantry. Ordinarily it would have been impossible for a man to steal through the castle of the Seiur Amory without detection, but tonight all the men were on the walls, or else sleeping soundly awaiting their call to guard-duty.

Belek warily unbolted a small door and slipped outside, keeping close to the walls. It was dark as pitch, low hanging clouds obscuring the stars, and there was no moon. Belek hesitated, for the moment uncertain; then he crossed the courtyard swiftly and entered the stables. He knew that Cormac's great black stallion was quartered here, and he trembled lest he rouse the full passion of the savage brute, which might make enough noise to wake the whole castle. But Belek's stealthy entrance caused no commotion; the great beast had his stall in another part of the stables. The Egyptian laid the girl in an empty stall, first tying her ankles, then stole swiftly back to the castle. Entering the kitchin he crossed to the small room where firewood was kept piled, and busied himself a few moments. Then he shut the door and hurriedly left the castle once more. A faint, grim smile played over his thin lips.

And now he was ready for the most dangerous part of his daring night's work. Crouching like a panther he stole across the courtyard to the postern gate. A single man-at-arms stood there, leaning on his spear and half asleep; it was the hour of darkness before dawn when vitality is at a low ebb. Belek crouched and leaped, silent and deadly as a panther. His mighty hands locked about his victim's throat and the man died without a cry.

Belek worked cautiously at the gate, felt it move beneath his hands and swing inward. He crouched silently, almost holding his breath, straining his eyes into the night. He could make out the dim somber reaches of the desert knifed with ravines and gulches; were men moving out there? Not even the keen eyed Egyptian could tell for the clouds hung low and deep darkness rested over all. He thought of returning for the girl and slipping out with her, then abandoned the plan. The men on the wall above him were not asleep. Their low voiced snatches of conversation reached him from time to time. He had stolen to the postern gate and killed his man almost beneath their feet, but it was behind their back. Their gaze was turned outward; they would see anything that moved just without the wall and if he stole forth,

arrows would fall like rain about him. Alone he would have taken the risk; but he dared not take the chance with the girl.

Out among the ravines a jackal yapped three times and ceased. Belek grinned fiercely; Suleyman Bey had not failed to carry out his part of the plan. Behind him he heard a cracking and snapping that grew and grew; a lurid light became apparent through the aperture of the castle and the men on the wall began to talk loudly and nastily as a sudden wild yell went up from inside the keep. As if in answer a clamor of ferocious shouts sounded from the desert outside and suddenly the darkness was alive with charging shadows.

Belek shouted once himself, in fierce triumph, and ran swiftly to the stable where he had left the girl.

Untitled Fragment

He knew de Bracy, they having fought against the Saracens together.

“Lord Valdez,” spoke de Bracy, “My friend, Angus Gordon. A free lance he is, new to Palestine and desirous of taking service with some strong lord – such as thou, Diego.”

For de Bracy stood not on formallity with his friends.

The baron looked on me narrowly.

“A Scot, thou sayest? A Highlander?” quoth he.

“A Highlander.” I answered.

“Then little need to ask if you can use that.” indicating the claymore that hung at my side. “All Highlanders are swordsmen. But how of the bow? And the spear?”

“With the long bow I can strike a wand at fifty paces.” I answered, “With the spear I am not accomplished. However, I will venture to run a course with any man you may wish.”

“High words,” he murmured.

“High words for high deeds.” I made answer. “I boast not. You asked me my accomplishments and I have told you. I am not so

Untitled Fragment

The wind from the Mediterranean wafted a thousand scents across the packed bazaar. The surging, disputatious throng that milled there was clamorous and bizarre with the sounds and colors of the East. Lean, hawk-like desert riders, fierce and suspicious as wild dogs in a strange territory, shouldered fat, oily Algerian merchants. Beggars whined for alms, thieves plied their trade, shopmen quarreled with customers and with each other, and every now and then the crowd broke precipitately to right and left as an arrogant-eyed sheikh came galloping through disdainfully careless of the lives and limbs of others – while his turbaned retinue laid lustily right and left with their riding whips. Or a huge Negro, naked except for a loin cloth, would stalk through, or a group of saber girt soldiers would swagger by. And all the while went on the business of barter – buying and selling – Persian sashes, Bokhariot wool, Turkish rugs, weapons from Egypt and Damascus, brass buckles from Afghanistan, spice and monkeys from India, ivory from Nubia.

And there were those who delt in human flesh. On the auction block in the center of the crowded market place stood a little clump of figures, chained and nearly naked, who looked out at the milling buyers with the patience and lethargy of oxen.

Recap of Harold Lamb's "The Wolf Chaser"

Aruk would have held the Gate of the Winds against Galdan Khan but shall a dwarf halt a giant? So the Frank Hu-Go built a fortress in the pass and manned it with twice a hundred Buriats and for three days he held it against the Kalmucks but on the fourth day Galdan Khan brought up his cannon and, not wishing to die like a rat in cask, and mindful of his promise to Galdan Khan, Hu-Go led his swordsmen against the Turkish camp and they met but Galdan Khan fled like the coward he was and commanded his archers to shoot at the Frank from afar for no man dared to face him in fair combat. His sword was as the blade of twenty men. So Hu-go died like a hero and his soul passed through the Gate in the Skies. Galdan Khan lost two thousand men before the Gate of the Winds and of the defenders there remained only Aruk the Short, nor was it cowardice that saved him. But Galdan Khan was halted and the beams of the rising sun showed the banners of Ukaba Khan coming over the mountain of Otz.

Untitled Fragment

The Persians had all fled and the Kalmuks were all dead but the remnants of the Torguts and the Mongols rallied around thier khan in a solid ring of steel against which the wild charges of the Turks crashed and shattered like sea spray against a great rock. The turbaned forms ringed the circle of the defenders in waist high piles. But not all the still forms were Turks. The Tatars were falling fast. Great gaps appeared in the circle and seeing this, Galdan Khan drew off the light armed troops and while the light Kirghiz horsemen harried the Tatars, the Great Khan formed his heavily armed squadrons, the Janizzaries, and hurled them against his dauntless foes. Like a mighty tidal wave of steel the savage warriors swept across the gory field upon the Unbelievers. The shout of, “Allah il Allah – ras-soul-il-allaho!” rose to the skies and drowned the yells of the Kirghiz and the battle-cry of the Tatars. The Tatar formation was shattered and the warriors of the North were scattered like chaff before a whirlwind. But the battle was not over. Borak still lived and Alashan and Cheke Noyon and Ukaba Khan and some nine hundred Tatar warriors. Until a Tatar’s head is off never say that his fighting is over.

All over the field handfuls of Tatars stood back to back and plied their deadly blades. Some strove to keep with their king but that was impossible. Not for Borak Khan a back-to-back defense. He ranged that sea of whirling swords like a wolf in a sheepfold. Since noon when he had seen the Crescent banner come over the mountain pass he had known his great army was doomed and he had planned like a devil and fought like a wild beast to snatch vivtory from ruin. In vain. In scores, in hundreds and in squadrons his men had fallen and he had seen his khans, his chiefs and his councillors go down one by one. Now his spirit was not that of a king striving to save a great people but the spirit of a man gone mad with hate and the lust of slaughter. He fought like a – a barbarian king, like a man who’s standards are down and who has lost a kingdom. He had emptied his quiver, thrown

his javelin, broken his spear, shattered his battle axe and now his gripped a long sword that was bathed in blood from point to hilt. That sword was like the hammer of Thor. In the hand of the devil incarnate that wielded it, it was a living flame. It cleft skulls, severed breasts, shore off heads and ripped up bellies. Borak had become in truth, the Wolf. Only four of his warriors could keep within calling distance of him as he hacked his way from one side of the field to the other, seeking Galdan Khan. These four were Cheke Noyan, Alshan, Ukaba Khan and Atai, chief of the Mongols.

In a space where the dead men were piled high and where no living man remained, the four paused for breath.

“Ai,” gasped Alshan, “the khan is as one possessed. Erlik, what a warrior! A falcon!”

Ukaba Khan smiled. “He is selling his life dearly for he is mad with defeat. That is all that is left to us. The Northern kingdom is no more. Hark, the Janizzaries raise already the cry of triumph. But let them not rejoice until they have the head of Borak Khan. For myself I wish only to die by my chief with my saber red with Turkish blood.”

Alashan sighed. “I should like to see Aina before I die.”

“If I can but face Zemal Noyan for a moment,” said Adai grimly, “I will be content to pass through the Gate In The Skies.”

Cheke Noyon said nothing. He flung his great, curved sword high in the air and caught it. His grizzled, lionlike head went back and from his lips came the terrible quavering yell – the battle-cry of the Grey Wolf Tatars. Swinging his heavy blade he hurled himself into the midst of the battle. The others followed.

The old chroniclers tell of that battle better than my feeble pen can narrate. They tell how the surviving Tatars rangen the field like hungry wolves. Of how Galdan Khan’s three sons and ten of his khans died by the hands of the Tatar chief and his four followers. And of how the four fell one by one. Alashan fell first, guarding his chiefs back. Then Atai bleeding from a hundred wounds, came face to face with Zemal Noyan and the traitor died beneath a Mongol sword and Atai died above him.

The Sign of the Sickle

Flashing sickle and falling grain
Witness the glory of Tamerlane.
The nations stood up, ripe and tall;
He was the sickle that reaped them all.
Red the reaping and sharp the blows,
Deserts stretched where the cities rose.
The sands lay bare to the night wind’s croon,
For the Sign of the Sickle hung over the moon.
Yet the sickle splintered and left no trace,
And the grain grows green on the desert’s face.

Mistress of Death

Ahead of me in the dark alley steel clashed and a man cried out as men cry only when death-stricken. Around a corner of the winding way three mantled shapes came running, blindly, as men run in panic and terror. I drew back against the wall to let them go past, and two crowded by me without even seeing me, breathing in hysterical gasps; but the third, running with his chin on his shoulder, blundered full against me.

He shrieked like a damned soul, and evidently deeming himself attacked, grappled me wildly, tearing at me with his teeth like a mad dog. With a curse I broke his grasp and flung him from me against the wall, but the violence of my exertion caused my foot to slip in a puddle on the stones, and I stumbled and went to my knee.

He fled screaming on up the alley, but as I rose, a tall figure loomed above me, like a phantom out of the deeper darkness. The light of a distant cresset gleamed dully on his morion and the sword lifted above my head. I barely had time to parry the stroke; sparks flew as our steel met, and I returned the stroke with a thrust of such violence that my point drove through teeth and neck and rang against the lining of his steel head-piece.

Who my attackers were I knew not, but there was no time for parley or explanation. Dim figures were upon me in the semi-darkness and blades whickered about my head. A stroke that clanged full on my morion filled my eyes with sparks of fire, and abandoning the point in my extremity I hewed right and left and heard men grunt and curse as my edge gashed them. Then, as I stepped back to avoid a swiping cut, my foot caught in the cloak of the man I had killed, and I fell sprawling over the corpse.

There was a fierce cry of triumph, and one sprang forward, sword lifted – but ere he could strike or I could lift my blade above my head, a quick step sounded behind me, a dim figure loomed in the uncertain light, and the downward sweeping blade rang on a sword in mid-air.

“Dog!” quoth the stranger with a curious accent. “Will you strike a fallen man?”

The other roared and cut at him madly, but by that time I was on my feet again, and as the others pressed in, I met them with point and edge, thrusting and slashing like a demon, for I was wild with fury at having been in such a plight as the stranger rescued me from. A side-long glance showed me the latter driving his sword through the body of the man who opposed him, and at this, and as I pressed them, drawing blood at each stroke, the rogues gave way and fled fleetly down the alley.

I turned then to my unknown friend, and saw a lithe, compactly-built man but little taller than myself. The glare of the distant cresset fell dimly upon him, and I saw that he was clad in fine Cordovan boots and velvet doublet, beneath which I glimpsed a glint of fine mesh-mail. A fine crimson cloak was flung over his shoulder, a feathered cap on his head, and beneath this his eyes, cold and light, danced restlessly. His face was clean-shaven and brown, with high cheek bones and thin lips, and there were scars that hinted of an adventurous career. He bore himself with something of a swagger, and his every action betokened steel-spring muscles and the co-ordination of a swordsman.

“I thank you, my friend,” quoth I. “Well for me that you came at the moment which you did.”

“Zounds!” cried he. “Think naught of it. ’Twas no more than I’d have done for any man – Saint Andrew! It’s a woman!”

There being no reply to that, I cleaned my blade and sheathed it, while he gaped at me open-mouthed.

“Agnes de La Fere!” he said slowly, at length. “It can be no other. I have heard of you, even in Scotland. Your hand, girl! I have long yearned to meet you. Nor is it an unworthy thing even for Dark Agnes to shake the hand of John Stuart.”

I grasped his hand, though in sooth, I had never heard of him, feeling steely thews in his fingers and a quick nervous grip that told me of a passionate, hair-trigger nature.

“Who were these rogues who sought your life?” he asked.

“I have many enemies,” I answered, “but I think these were mere skulking rogues, robbers and murderers. They were pursuing three men, and I think tried to cut my throat to hush my tongue.”

“Likely enough,” quoth he. “I saw three men in black mantles flee out of the alley mouth as though Satan were at their heels, which aroused my curiosity, so I came to see what was forward, especially as I heard the rattle of steel. Saint Andrew! Men said your sword-play was like summer lightning, and it is even as they said! But let us see if the rogues have indeed fled, or are merely lurking beyond that crook to stab us in the back as we depart.”

He stepped cautiously around the crook, and swore under his breath.

“They are gone, in sooth, but I see something lying in the alley. I think it is a dead man.”

Then I remembered the cry I had heard, and I joined him. A few moments later we were bending over two forms that lay sprawled in the mud of the alley. One was a small man, mantled like the three who had fled, with a deep gash in his breast that had let out his life. But as I spoke to Stuart on the matter, he swore suddenly. He had turned the other man on his back, and was staring at him in surprize.

“This man has been dead for hours,” quoth he. “Moreover he died not by sword or pistol. Look! See his features how they are swollen and purple? It is the mark of the gallows! And he is clad still in the gibbet-shirt. By Saint Andrew, Agnes, do you know who this is?” And when I shook my head, “It is Costranno, the Italian sorcerer, who was hanged at dawn this morning on the gibbet outside the walls, for practising the black arts. He it was who poisoned the son of the Duke of Tours and caused the blame to be laid upon an innocent man, but Francoise de Bretagny, suspecting the truth, trapped him into a confession to her, and laid the facts before the authorities.”

“I had heard something of this matter,” quoth I. “But I have been in Chartres only a matter of a week.”

“It is Costranno, well enough,” said Stuart, shaking his head. “His features are so distorted I would not have known him, save that the middle finger of his left hand is missing. And this other is Jacques Pelligny, his pupil in the black arts; sentence of death was passed on him, likewise, but he had fled and could not be found. Well, his art did not save him from a footpad’s sword. Costranno’s followers have cut him down from the gibbet – but why should they have brought the body back into the city?”

“There is something in Pelligny’s hand,” I said, prying the dead fingers apart. It was as if, even in death, they gripped what they held. It was a

fragment of gold chain, and fastened to it a most curious red jewel that gleamed in the darkness like an angry eye.

"Saint Andrew!" muttered Stuart. "A rare stone, i'faith – hark!" he started to his feet. "The watch! We must not be found by these corpses!"

Far down the alley I saw the glow of moving lanthorns and heard the tramp of mailed feet. As I scrambled up, the jewel and chain slipped from my fingers – it was almost as if they were snatched from my hand – and fell full on the breast of the dead sorcerer. I did not wish to take the time to retrieve it, so I hurried up the alley after Stuart, and glancing back, I saw the jewel glittering like a crimson star on the dead man's bosom.

Emerging from the alley into a narrow winding street, scarcely better lighted, we hurried along it until we came to an inn, and entered it. Then, seating ourselves at a table somewhat apart from the others who wrangled and cast dice on the wine-stained boards, we called for wine and the host brought us two great jacks.

"To our better acquaintance," quoth John Stuart, lifting his tankard. "By Saint Andrew, now that I see you in the light, I admire you the more. You are a fine, tall woman, but even in morion, doublet, trunk-hose and boots none could mistake you for a man. Well are you called Dark Agnes. For all your red hair and fair skin there is something strange and dark about you. Men say you move through life like one of the Fates, unmoved, unchangeable, potent with tragedy and doom, and that the men who ride with you do not live long. Tell me, girl, why did you don breeks and take the road of men?"

I shook my head, unable to say myself, but as he urged me to tell him something of myself, I said: "My name is Agnes de Chastillon, and I was born in the village of La Fere, in Normandy. My father is the bastard son of the Duc de Chastillon and a peasant woman – a mercenary soldier of the Free Companies until he grew too old to march and fight. If I had not been tougher than most he would have killed me with his beating before I was grown. When at last he sought to marry me to a man I hated, I killed that man, and fled from the village. One Ettienne Villiers befriended me, but also taught me that a helpless woman is fair play to all men, and when I bested him in even fight, I learned that I was strong as most men, and quicker.

"Later I fell in with Guiscard de Clisson, a leader of the Free Companies, who taught me the use of the sword before he was slain in an ambush. I

took naturally to the life of a man, and can drink, swear, march fight and boast with the best of them. I have yet to meet my equal at sword play."

Stuart scowled slightly as if my word did not please him overmuch, and he lifted his tankard, quaffed deeply, and said: "There be as good men in Scotland as in France, and there men say that John Stuart's blade is not made of straw. But who is this?"

The door had opened and a gust of cold wind made the candles flicker, and sent a shiver over the men on the settles. A tall man entered, closing the door behind him. He was wrapped in a wide black mantle, and when he raised his head and his glance over the tavern, a silence fell suddenly. That face was strange and unnatural in appearance, being so dark in hue it was almost black. His eyes were strange, murky and staring. I saw several topers cross themselves as they met his gaze, and then he seated himself at a table in a corner furthest from the candles, and drew his mantle closer about him, though the night was warm. He took the tankard proffered him by an apprehensive slattern and bent his head over it, so his face was no longer visible under his slouch hat, and the hum of the tavern began again, though somewhat subdued.

"Blood on that mantle," said John Stuart. "If that man be not a cutthroat then I am much befooled. Host, another bottle!"

"You are the first Scotsman I ever met," said I, "though I have had dealings with Englishmen."

"A curse on the breed!" he cried. "The devil take them all into his keeping. And a curse on my enemies who exiled me from Scotland."

"You are an exile?" I asked.

"Aye! With scant gold in my sporran. But fortune ever favors the brave." And he laid hand on the hilt at his hip.

But I was watching the stranger in the corner, and Stuart turned to stare at him. The man had lifted his hand and crooked a finger at the fat host, and that rogue drew nigh, wiping his hands on his leathern apron and uneasy in his expression. There was something about the black-mantled stranger that repelled men.

The stranger spoke, but his words were a mumble, and mine host shook his head in bewilderment.

"An Italian," muttered Stuart. "I know that jabber anywhere."

But the stranger shifted into French, and as he spoke, haltingly at first, his words grew plainer, his voice fuller.

“Francoise de Bretagny,” quoth he, and repeated the name several times. “Where is the house of Francoise de Bretagny?”

The inn-keeper began giving him directions, and Stuart muttered: “Why should that ill-visaged Italian rogue desire to go to Francoise de Bretagny?”

“From what I hear,” I answered cynically, “it is no great surprize to hear any man asking for her house.”

“Lies are always told about beautiful women,” answered Stuart, lifting his tankard. “Because she is said to be the mistress of the Duke of Orleans does not mean that she – ”

He froze suddenly, tankard to lip, staring, and I saw an expression of surprize pass over his brown, scarred face. At that moment the Italian had risen, and drawing his wide mantle about him, made for the door.

“Stop him!” roared Stuart, leaping to his feet, and dragging out his sword. “Stop that rogue!”

But at that instant a band of soldiers in morions and breastplates came shouldering in, and the Italian glided out past them and shut the door behind him. Stuart started forward with a curse, to halt as the soldiers barred the way. Striding into the center of the tavern, and roving a stern glance over all the cringing occupants, the captain, a tall man in a gleaming breastplate, said loudly: “Agnes de La Fere, I arrest you for the murder of Jacques Pelligny!”

“What do you mean, Tristan?” I exclaimed angrily, springing up. “I did not kill Pelligny!”

“This woman saw you leave the alley where the man was slain,” answered he, indicating a tall, fair wench in feathers and gauds who cowered in the grasp of a burly man-at-arms and would not meet my gaze. I knew her well, a courtesan whom I had befriended, and whom I would not have expected to give false testimony against me.

“Then she must have seen me too,” quoth John Stuart, “for I was with Agnes. If you arrest her you must arrest me too, and by Saint Andrew, my sword will have something to say about that.”

“I have naught to do with you,” answered Tristan. “My business is with this woman.”

“Man, you are a fool!” cried Stuart gustily. “She did not kill Pelligny. And what if she did. Was not the rogue under sentence of death?”

“He was meat for the hangman, not the private citizen,” answered Tristan.

“Listen,” said Stuart. “He was slain by footpads, who then attacked Agnes who chanced to be traversing the alley at the time. I came to her aid, and we slew two of the rogues. Did you not find their bodies, with masks to their heads to prove their trades?”

“We saw no such thing,” answered Tristan. “Nor were you seen thereabouts, so your testimony is without value. This woman here saw Agnes de La Fere pursue Pelligny into the alley and there stab him. So I am forced to take her to the prison.”

“I know well why you wish to arrest me, Tristan,” I said coolly, approaching him with an easy tread. “I had not been in Chartres a day before you sought to make me your mistress. Now you take this revenge upon me. Fool! I am mistress only to Death!”

“Enough of this idle talk,” ordered Tristan curtly. “Seize her, men!” It was his last command on earth, for my sword was through him before he could lift his hand. The guard closed in on me with a yell, and as I thrust and parried, John Stuart sprang to my side and in an instant the inn was a madhouse, with stamping boots, clanging blades and the curses and yells of slaughter. Then we broke through, leaving the floor strewn with corpses, and gained the street. As we broke through the door I saw the wench they had brought to testify against me cowering behind an overturned settle and I grasped her thick yellow locks and dragged her with me into the street.

“Down that alley,” gasped Stuart. “Other guardsmen will be here anon. “Saint Andrew, Agnes, will you burden yourself with that big hussy? We must take to our heels!”

“I have a score to settle with her,” I gritted, for all my hot blood was roused. I hauled her along with us until we made a turn in the alley and halted for breath.

“Watch the street,” I bade him, and then turning to the cowering wench, I said in calm fury: “Margot, if an open enemy deserves a thrust of steel, what fate doth a traitress deserve? Not four days agone I saved you from a beating at the hands of a drunken soldier, and gave you money because your tears touched my foolish compassion. By Saint Trignan, I have a mind to cut the head from your fair shoulders!’

“Oh, Agnes,” she sobbed, falling on her knees, and clasping my legs. “Have Mercy! I – ”

“I’ll spare your worthless life,” I said angrily, beginning to unsling my sword belt. “But I mean to turn up your petticoats and whip you as no

beadle ever did.”

“Nay, Agnes!” she wailed. “First hear me! I did not lie! It is true that I saw you and the Scotsman coming from the alley with naked swords in your hands. But the watch said merely that three bodies were lying in the alley, and two were masked, showing they were thieves. Tristan said whoever slew them did a good night’s work, and asked me if I had seen any coming from the alley. So I thought no harm, and replied that I had seen you and the Scotsman John Stuart. But when I spoke your name, he smiled and told his men that he had his reasons for desiring to get Agnes de La Fere in a dungeon, helpless and unarmed; and bade them do as he told them. So he told me that my testimony about you would be accepted, but the rest, about John Stuart, and the two thieves he would not accept. And he threatened me so terribly that I dared not defy him.”

“The foul dog,” I muttered. “Well, there is a new captain of the watch in hell tonight.”

“But you said *three* bodies,” broke in John Stuart. “Were there not four? Pelligny, two thieves, and the body of Costranno?”

She shook her head.

“I saw the bodies. There were but three. Pelligny lay deep in the alley, fully clad, the other two around the crook, and the larger was naked.”

“Eh?” ejaculated Stuart. “By Heaven, that Italian! I have but now remembered! On, to the house of Francoise de Bretagny!”

“Why there?” I demanded.

“When the Italian in the inn drew his cloak about him to depart,” answered Stuart, “I glimpsed on his breast a fragment of golden chain and a great red jewel – I believe the very jewel Pelligny grasped in his hand when we found him. I believe that man is a friend of Costranno’s, a magician come to take vengeance on Francoise de Bretagny! Come!”

He set impetuously off up the alley, and I followed him, while the girl Margot scurried away in another direction, evidently glad to get off with a whole skin.

Conclusion from the First Draft

“As that Italian drew his cloak about him, I glimpsed his left hand – *it lacked the middle finger*!”

“What madness is this?” I muttered.

“Aye, and I glimpsed that cursed red jewel glinting on his bosom. Hark, Agnes, suppose that Costranno knew the secret of bringing corpses back to life. Suppose that the jewel held the secret; that after Pelligny and the others cut him down from the gibbet, they were bringing him to his house to restore life to him, when they were apprehended by those rogues. You dropped the jewel on his bosom. Doubtless the incantations had already been made. Moreover that alley, men tell me is paved with stones from an ancient heathen temple that once stood in a grove outside the city, in the days before Rome.

“If such a man were brought back to life, he would remember slowly. But he would seek vengeance. And it was the testimony of Francoise de Bretagny which hanged Costranno!”

To her house we went swiftly, and found a servant lying in the court strangled, with the marks on his throat of a hand lacking the middle finger. We found another servant who had gone mad from seeing the dead man approach Francoise de Bretagny’s chamber and bear her away in her night shift. We followed down a long flight of stairs the existence of which the girl had known nothing, and came into a mysterious crypt. On a stone dais lay Francoise de Bretagny, naked, and Costranno was raising an seven sided slab of stone in the floor, revealing a black gaping hole in the light of a torch which burned in a niche.

I fought Costranno, while Stuart raved and cursed because he could not come at him. I passed my sword thrice through the undeadman’s body without harming him and only my mail shirt beneath my doublet saved me from his terrific thrusts. At last I struck his head from his body and body and head pitched into the black aperture. Taking the torch, I looked down, and a black arm shot out of the darkness and closed on my doublet, striving to drag me into the hole. I struck down with my torch and the thing let go. I had only a glimpse of a distorted apish black thing falling, and the torch fell, dwindling to a speck of light far below, like a meteor. We replaced the slab and carried Francoise out of the crypt, and into the house above, assured of her protection from the watch of the town.

Appendices

Howard's Journey

Historical Influences to Historical Triumphs
by Howard Andrew Jones

Pound for pound Robert E. Howard's historical fiction more than holds its weight against Howard's other genre and series work. Over just a few years Howard fashioned a grander helping of these stories than many historical writers craft over a lifetime of effort, surpassing them not only in word count but in quality.

It should not be assumed, though, that he wrote any of his stories in a vacuum, nor that when he first sat down to draft historical fiction he immediately typed works of genius. Professional author though he was, Howard still had to find his comfort level with the genre. He did so in part by being familiar with both history and the writers who brought it to life before him.

All writers are influenced by other storytellers, finding in some traits or themes that they wish to emulate and in others pitfalls they wish to avoid. Usually writers imitate scenes or characters; sometimes they use plot structures or character types as models to work from; and sometimes they find inspiration at the foot of the storyteller then strike off on their own path.

While it's typical of writers to learn by imitation, Robert E. Howard seldom imitated for long before his own voice was so intercalated into a composition that the inspiration was no longer obvious. Scholars have noted the influence of Jack London and Rudyard Kipling in his work, as well as Howard's familiarity with myth and legend, likely via Thomas Bulfinch. The shadow cast by adventure and historical adventure writer Harold Lamb

over Howard's work has been noted but never discussed at length. Robert E. Howard seems to have found a kind of kindred spirit in Lamb, and progressed from modeling off his fiction until, student growing to master, Howard matched and even sometimes surpassed his skill.

That is no mean thing, for Harold Lamb was one of the finest of all American adventure writers. Even today, only a few years out from the hundredth anniversary of Lamb's first great historicals, Lamb's pacing feels modern. His best fiction is vibrant, cinematic, and exciting, which put him decades ahead of almost all his contemporaries. His plotting rises from the collision of motivations among his characters and is seldom predictable. His depth of knowledge permeates his work without ever derailing the story to trumpet mastery of the material. His characters live and breathe and ride the steppes with an honest multiculturalism. In his work heroism and villainy do not reside in particular cultures, but with individuals – we do not see much evidence of the white man's burden so prevalent in other stories penned at this time. Some of his contemporary crafters of historical magazine fiction could spin yarns that worked as well – Arthur D. Howden Smith and Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur among them – but no one else so consistently delivered high quality stories, and without resorting to formula.

It was chance that set Howard on the road to encounter Lamb's fiction at the age of fifteen, when he bought a copy of *Adventure* magazine. We can't know whether or not there was a Harold Lamb story in that particular issue, as Howard didn't mention the issue number. He was hooked by the magazine, though, and Lamb was one of *Adventure*'s stars. Howard could not have read the magazine for very long without stumbling upon Lamb's work.

Howard describes the moment of discovery himself in a July 1933 letter to H. P. Lovecraft. Although he had always loved reading, books had been hard to come by. "Magazines were even more scarce than books. It was after I moved into 'town' (speaking comparatively) that I began to buy magazines. I well remember the first I ever bought. I was fifteen years old; I bought it one summer night when a wild restlessness in me would not let me keep still, and I had exhausted all the reading material on the place. I'll never forget the thrill it gave me. Somehow it never had occurred to me before that I could buy a magazine. It was an *Adventure*. I still have the copy. After that I bought *Adventure* for many years, though at times it

cramped my resources to pay the price. It came out three times a month, then."

Adventure endured in pulp form for nearly forty-three years, birthed in 1910 and falling into a feeble senility after a change of format in 1953 before an ignominious death. With its reputation for historical accuracy and its stable of well-known authors, *Adventure* was arguably the most prestigious of all pulp magazines when Robert E. Howard first chanced upon it. Those familiar with magazines of today should not assume *Adventure* was slim, quarterly, or populated with literary fiction. In a time when there were no televisions, America was a nation of readers, and turned to entertainment in these magazines, new issues of which often appeared two or three times a month. Drug store racks and newsstands overflowed with an immense variety of detective and mystery pulps, which were nestled beside magazines devoted to romance, or sports stories, or war stories. A few, like *Argosy* and *Adventure,* published a variety of fiction set in different lands and times, the sole unifying theme of their contents being that the material had to entertain. As for what Howard might have seen when he flipped open a particular issue – one that likely featured an oil painting of a historical warrior dashing into battle, given the typical *Adventure* cover of those years – let's turn to pulp scholar Robert Weinberg.

> Issues from the early 1920s, a favorite period of many collectors, were 192 pages of eye-straining print and usually included a complete novel, two or three complete novelettes (in reality short novels) and a goodly chunk of a serial. There would also be five or six short stories and a bunch of departments like "Old Songs That Men Have Sung," "Ask Adventure," and "Lost Trails." The letter column, known as "The Camp Fire" was perhaps the best letter column published in any magazine, ever. Usually, authors of stories in the issues wrote long essays where they detailed the historical background of their work. Letters from readers argued over facts in previous stories. In an America just emerging from the Wild West and the First World War, the readers of *Adventure* weren't just arm-chair adventurers spouting theories. A typical letter began, "I enjoyed Hugh Pendexter's story about the gunfight at the O.K. Corral, but he got some of the

details wrong. I was there and remember quite distinctly …" and continue on for three pages about the famous gun battle.*

Adventure today is most famous for printing the work of an elite cadre of talented adventure writers: Arthur D. Howden Smith, Arthur O. Friel, George Surdez, and many others, although it is these three and its two most famous contributors, Talbot Mundy and Harold Lamb, whose work has been most often reprinted outside the pulps.

It seems clear that Howard enjoyed both Mundy and Lamb. We can see shades of Mundy's influence, at least topically, in the tales of El Borak and even in the stories of Conan. But for all that Mundy is mentioned more than twice as often as Lamb in Howard's surviving correspondence, it is Lamb's writing that seems to have been the greater inspiration.

If Howard had never crossed paths with *Adventure* until 1921, then he missed the earliest phase of Lamb's *Adventure* years, when he wrote the first fourteen stories of his signature character, Khlit the Cossack. Howard does not seem to have encountered the aging warrior until Khlit's return as a secondary character; this is a shame, for the third through the ninth tales of the wandering Cossack are some of the finest adventure fiction ever written. They take the Cossack across the steppes of Asia, into ancient tombs and the citadels of kings, bringing him face-to-face with emperors living and dead, bold comrades, scheming traitors, and lovely damsels. Tempting as it is to speculate that Robert E. Howard devoured these earliest tales, we have no record that he did so, though it is easy to imagine that he would have enjoyed reading them.

It seems clear, though, that Howard was a follower of the second, shorter cycle of Cossack stories that Lamb penned, featuring characters named Ayub and Demid. Howard wrote a poem titled with the twain's name, although the poem is unfortunately lost. Demid is lean, hawkish, quiet, thoughtful; a talented swordsman, he is also a natural leader. Ayub is not as bright – he'd rather act first and then think – but he's a seasoned veteran and loyal friend, a mighty man who wields a massive two-handed sword and who can drink any fellow under the table.

Readers of the Conan tales can find references to Howard's Kozaks and it is tempting to credit this influence, and the manner in which certain terms are used, to Lamb. But we should not assume too much. While Lamb's

shadow likely lies over these stories, he wasn't the only pulp writer to pen Cossack tales.

What we do know is that Howard once sat down with a large stack of Lamb stories and transcribed all of the foreign words for equipment and clothing he found within them. Howard scholar Patrice Louinet found a list of these words in among Howard's papers and, suspecting they might be from Lamb stories, conferred with me. By searching the texts we discovered that the terms were listed in the same order that they had appeared in several Lamb stories: "The Shield," "The Sea of Ravens," "Kirdy," "The Witch of Aleppo," "White Falcon," and "The Wolf Chaser." Clearly Howard must have found inspiration in these stories, or the stack would not have been so deep. For further evidence that Lamb's tales struck some primal chord, we need look no further than Lamb's "The Wolf Chaser." Howard wrote a five-hundred-word recap of the story, then wrote nearly a thousand words of his own take on the events, reusing the place names and some of the characters.

Preserved in Howard's body of letters are two that he wrote to *Adventure*. In February of 1924 he wrote the editors to ask more than a dozen questions about Mongolia; Howard wanted to know Mongol names for objects and creatures like swords and tigers, whether or not Mongolians worshipped Erlik, Bon, Buddha, or all three, where exactly the Khirgiz lived, and many other questions besides. He almost certainly had encountered these terms in Lamb's *Adventure* tales. In July of 1924, Howard again wrote to *Adventure*, though this time he asked questions about Europe, wondering what exactly the rights of a Feudal Baron were, how long the Feudal system flourished in central Europe, and other related matters.

Howard had been drawn to history from a very young age, so we should not think that he found all his desire for writing historical adventure from perusing the pages of *Adventure* magazine. He was keenly interested in Irish history, about which Lamb seems rarely to have concerned himself, and as is well known, wrote widely of a certain Puritan who spent a great deal of time in Africa, another area that never seems to have much interested Lamb.

In Lamb, though, he found a kindred spirit. It is not that the themes Howard so often dealt with in his fiction came first from Lamb, it is that Lamb's themes resonated so strongly with Howard because the outlook of both men was quite similar. They were drawn to write tales of outsiders and

veteran warriors. Both were suspicious of civilization's strengths and often portrayed rulers and merchants as decadent, greedy, and immoral. Many of Lamb's heroes were barbarians, or one step removed, just as Howard's were. And both gloried in bloody action and adventure. Lamb never comes right out and says that barbarism is the natural state of mankind, but in many of his stories it is made clear that civilization will destroy a way of life that Lamb thinks more honorable – that of the folk who protect the borders, who are continually pushed back from the civilization over which they themselves stand sentinel. Overall Lamb was a better plotter (though Howard's finest stories stand at least shoulder to shoulder with Lamb's) but Howard was the more gifted storyteller. Lamb's style is spare and strong, and quite effective, but it rarely rises to the poetic and dreamy heights of Howard's greatest work.

Howard himself tried *Adventure* magazine as a market, but never managed to get in. By the time he was writing his finest historical fiction, he'd given up on ever appearing in the magazine – more is the pity – but did have a regular market of his own.

Oriental Stories

Unfortunately for all lovers of swashbucklers, *Oriental Stories*, later briefly retitled *Magic Carpet Magazine*, had a short lifespan. In four years, only fourteen issues were produced. Howard seems to have been made aware of the publication by *Weird Tales* editor Farnsworth Wright, who was readying to launch the new historical magazine. Wright wrote to Howard that "I especially want historical tales – tales of the Crusades, of Genghis Khan, of Tamerlane, and the wars between Islam and Hindooism. Each story will be complete in one issue, and we will use no serials. The longer lengths are preferred – that is about 15,000 words."

To all appearances, Howard seems to have leapt at the chance to write this kind of fiction. He said in a 1930 letter to Lovecraft that:

> I think Wright's "Oriental Stories" bids fair to show more originality than the average magazine dealing with the East, though the initial issue, was, to me, slightly dissappointing – not in the appearance of the magazine but in the contents. However, with such writers as Hoffman-Price, Owens and Kline, I look for better things … For my part the mystic phase of the East has always interested me less than the material side – the red and royal panorama of war, rapine and conquest. What I write for "Oriental Stories" will be purely action, and romance – mainly historical tales. And I greatly fear that my Turks and Mongols are merely Irishmen and Englishmen in turbans and sandals!

Howard was worried that he wouldn't be able to accurately portray people of other cultures and times, but after his initial forays he showed the humanity of his characters, regardless of their point of origin. Far from sounding like Irishmen and Englishmen with turbans, they walk onto the stage as fully realized people, bearing their courage and their flaws regardless of their nationality. The sainted and knightly are few and far between in these stories. Instead Howard drafted fiction of hard men and hard deeds.

The first historical Howard sent Wright's way shared a byline with Howard's old friend Tevis Clyde Smith. In a letter to Smith penned in July

or August of 1930, Howard directly quoted what Farnsworth Wright had said about the story, relaying Wright was “very well pleased with Red Blades of Black Cathay, and may use this as the cover design story for our third issue of Oriental Stories.”

It’s easy to see why Wright would be pleased with the tale. A greater mystery is why the already accomplished Howard wrote it with his friend. Smith once said that he’d handled the research while Howard did the writing, which still seems odd, for Howard was not only capable of solid research but enjoyed the process. Howard scholars speculate that the story might simply have been a case of Howard trying to help his friend Smith get into print in the pulps.

“Red Blades” is an engaging tale, and a solid enough sounding blow, though it can only hint at what will shortly follow. It is the only Howard historical that can truly be said to read like a Harold Lamb pastiche. It may be that Howard leaned heavily upon a genre master as he was finding his bearings. Howard is too accomplished to mimic plots, but he borrows and remixes concepts he came across in Lamb’s writing, most particularly within “The Three Palladins.” There is the same search for Prester John – though Howard’s character comes from the west rather than the east – and the discovery of the Keraits (Christians) that Prester John rules only a short time before Genghis Khan invades the region. Just as Sir Hugo sides with natives against the invasion of a Mongol tribe in Lamb’s “The Wolf Chaser,” Howard’s Godric advises the Black Cathayans to hold a narrow pass, though instead of facing off a tribe and antagonists unknown to westerns, he fights against the forces and champions of Genghis Khan, and even meets the mighty conqueror himself. Anyone who has read Lamb’s “The Three Palladins” or “The Making of the Morning Star” or the second and third novels of his Durandal trilogy will be familiar with the portrayal of Subotai, Chepe Noyon, and Genghis Khan, who sound and behave in “Red Blades” very much the way they do when scripted by Lamb. So similar are they in tone and behavior that “Red Blades” can almost be seen as a companion piece in the same fictional universe: nothing within Howard’s tale precludes any of the events within Lamb’s stories, and may even follow naturally from some of them. Howard is no slavish imitator, and goes so far as to invent additional characters and moments, but the influence is unmistakable.

Howard flew solo for his next historical outing, the first of two finished tales of Cormac FitzGeoffrey. Titled “Hawks of Outremer,” it would eventually appear in *Oriental Stories.* Howard named FitzGeoffrey “the most somber character I have yet attempted” and sent him “into the East on a Crusade to escape his enemies.” In an October 1930 letter to Harold Preece, Howard wrote that he was considering writing a series based around the character. Howard did so, but it was short lived, consisting of only two completed tales and one unfinished draft of another, possibly because FitzGeoffrey was better in conception than in execution. Howard developed a complex background for his character, then frontloaded it into the first FitzGeoffrey story through direct narration and a long, forced conversation between FitzGeoffrey and an old friend, Sir Rupert. The depth of information is impressive, but the means of transmission is not; it is a contrived information dump.

The next chapter reveals FitzGeoffrey’s personality and mission through showing him in action, a marked improvement, but the tale lurches forward without ever really convincing the reader we should care about FitzGeoffrey or his adventure. In all it’s a weaker tale than “Red Blades.” A sequel story starts more strongly, but never really rises to great heights. Howard himself seemed to think he sold it merely on his reputation, “if I can be said to have one. The title, ‘The Blood of Bel-Shazzer,’ referring to a jewel, was the only interesting thing about it. The plot was hackneyed and sketchy, the action labored and artificial. Only once in the entire story did I evoke a slight spark of the fire that has smoldered out in me.” Howard frequently undervalued his writing and his intelligence when he discussed them in his letters, but his criticism this time is somewhat accurate. “The Blood of Belshazzar” is a murder mystery featuring a blizzard of characters who are introduced in passing as FitzGeoffrey surveys them in a feasting-hall. They are difficult to remember and harder to care about. FitzGeoffrey passively moves though the action, striving only to survive as he comes first upon the murdered victim and then the rogues responsible. The problems in the story look forward somewhat to one of the central issues of Howard’s “The God in the Bowl” in that the mystery itself just isn’t very compelling.

When FitzGeoffrey is saved at the end by a Mongolian borrowed from a Lamb story (one who calls FitzGeoffrey *Bogatyr,* a Russian term from Lamb’s Cossack stories unlikely to be used by a tenth-century Mongol) he

rides off for further adventures, although after two stumbles it is hard to imagine too many people would be eager for another helping.

It is only with the third tale that we can finally glimpse what Howard must have been striving for with FitzGeoffrey in the first stories. It's never seemed sporting to me to spend too much time criticizing the characters, prose, and plot elements of fragments and unpolished works – after all, they're *unfinished.* They weren't taken from the workshed for presentation because the writer didn't think they were ready to share. What fragments *can* show us is the writer's process and reveal the means that the writer employed in the act of creation. What we have of "The Slave Princess" would make any other writer shake his head a little in wonder. In first draft form it's as polished as most finished pieces by other authors. There are occasional moments where an adjustment would have been called for – FitzGeoffrey's retelling of his early battles goes on for far too long near the fragment's conclusion – but it's a *rough draft,* and an impressive one. It starts with a bang and flows smoothly from scene to scene. FitzGeoffrey may not be likable, but he fascinates, which is more than he did in the first two stories. He's a shrewd schemer, a mighty warrior who has been shaped by his tumultuous past and genetics into more a force of nature than a normal human. In his physical description, with his volcanic blue eyes and square cut mane of black hair, he physically resembles Conan. His fighting prowess and cleverness look forward to the Cimmerian as well, although there the similarities end, for he lacks Conan's humor, and it is hard to picture Conan so completely losing his cool that he launches into a berserk frenzy, as FitzGeoffrey does, nearly choking his host to death.

Judging from the surviving plot synopsis, Howard abandoned the story with only a few thousand words to go; most of the key scenes were composed, and he had to have known that the story was working. Writers have a sense about such things. It would have been a good story, had he completed it. But perhaps he abandoned a potentially *good* story because he had in mind one that would be *great.*

From Journeyman to Master

If Howard had stopped with the FitzGeoffrey tales his historical work would only be an interesting sideline in the adventure writer's career. Instead, he found his comfort level and sat down to write masterpieces.

In its first moments, "The Sowers of the Thunder" seems to mimic "Hawks of Outremer," for the story begins with the arrival of a mighty Frank who before long seems poised to pour out his tale in too much detail, just as FitzGeoffrey had done in "Hawks of Outremer." But Howard has to have recognized how artificial that opening discussion from "Hawks" was, and closes the mouth of Cahal just as his tale is growing interesting. It leaves the reader wanting more rather than drowning in details, and is a sign that Howard has mastered his narrative.

In the first chapter Howard introduces us to Cahal and Haroun, both giants of men. Howard has Haroun play cleverly with clues about his own identity without tipping his hand to readers or Cahal and presumably other listeners; the character is clearly trying to amuse himself via his own antics, be it the subtle hints as to his true identity or the broad attempts to find pleasure in a drinking contest with the grim Cahal. Haroun recognizes in Cahal a kindred spirit, a theme that runs through the story. If Cahal sees the same thing he does not show it, understanding instead that he and Haroun are evenly matched, which wakens in him a wary suspicion that the Moslem is a threat. He is right, of course, for Cahal and the readers eventually learn that Haroun is Baibars. The Moslem is more reckless than Cahal perhaps by nature or perhaps because he is more secure in his place and has unlimited resources at his disposal. Cahal is loyal to his people, Baibars is loyal to his cause – namely himself. Command and power are his, but he is lonely, a lion among sheep. In Cahal he senses a man like himself, one he would rather name friend.

Howard presents events like a master playwright, revealing key moments on stage and discussing mighty battles that take place beyond. He shows us Cahal plotting a mad dash for treasure with the knight Renault, but not the encounter with Kharesmians which destroys all but Cahal. The conversation between the Shaykh Suleiman and Cahal is head and shoulders above the informative discussion in the tales of FitzGeoffrey: it reveals both the character of the noble Shaykh, who mourns the death of an enemy and

respects the prowess of the mad Frank, and emphasizes to us again the might and endurance of Cahal himself.

In the end, though, Baibars triumphs no matter Cahal's great efforts. Glittering, victorious, he is in a fine mood as he looks down upon the Frank dying in the midst of the battlefield. Baibars names him king, then says "they who oppose the destiny of Baibars lie under my horses' hoofs, and over them I ride up the gleaming stair of empire!"

But Cahal, whose own kingdom eluded him, whose own hopes were dashed just as they were within his grasp, has no joy to share. He knows that there is no glory in the rule of men. "Welcome to the fellowship of kings!" Howard has him say: "To the glory and the witch-fire, the gold and the moon-mist, the splendor and the death! Baibars, a king hails thee!"

The story is a long, bloody thrill ride. Kings and kingdoms have fallen and loves have been lost; it is a masterful performance, and a sign of more great works to come.

Howard next turned to the time of Tamerlane. Lamb's excellent "The Grand Cham," published in *Adventure* in 1921, is set in the same time period Howard chose to write about, and features a protagonist, Michael Beorn, who interacts with both Tamerlane and Bayazid, just as Howard's protagonist does. Despite these similarities, Howard's inspiration seems to have come from Wright, who, as Howard wrote in a letter to Tevis Clyde Smith in August of 1931, had been "hinting Tamerlane as a fit subject for an Oriental Story story … Now I've got to get hold of something on the Big Tatar and try to pound out a novelet; I've been thinking of writing a tale about him for a long time. And Babar the Tiger who established the Mogul rule in India – and the imperial phase in the life of Baibars the Panther, the subject of my last story – and the rise of the Ottomans – and the conquest of Constantinople by the Fifth Crusade – and the subjugation of the Turks by the Arabs in the days of Abu Bekr – and the gradual supplanting of the Arab masters by their Turkish slaves which culminated in the conquest of Asia Minor and Palestine by the Seljuks – and the rise of Saladin – and the final destruction of Christian Outremer by Al Kalawun – and the first Crusade – Godfrey of Bouillon, Baldwin of Boulogne, Bohemund – Sigurd the Jorsala-farer – Barbarossa – Coeur de Lion. Ye gods, I could write a century and still have only tapped the reservoir of dramatic possibilities. I wish to Hell I had a dozen markets for historical fiction – I'd never write anything else."

One can only wish Howard had written all that he lists here. It is likely, though not altogether certain, that Howard was introduced to many of these topics in the fiction and non-fiction of Harold Lamb, who wrote of Babur, and who'd written of Baibars three months before "Sowers of the Thunder" saw print, for *Adventure* was steadily publishing excerpts from Lamb's upcoming history of the Crusades.

By this point, though, Lamb's influence is no longer as obvious in Howard's own historicals. Donald's decision to flee the west with his newfound companion to serve in the east is reminiscent of Sir Robert's departure with a disguised Chepé Bega to serve Genghis Khan in the opening of Lamb's "The Making of the Morning Star," but it is far from identical, and the persons of Tamerlane and Bayazid are similar in their portrayal only in that they are powerful rulers. Gone is the sense from "Red Blades of Black Cathay" that the historical figures have been borrowed from Lamb's own depiction of them; Howard has grown confident enough in his own abilities that he makes of them what he wishes.

As with "Sowers," "Lord of Samarcand" is the tale of an eastern monarch and a western man who crosses his path. In the case of "Samarcand," Donald serves Tamerlane because he desires vengeance against Bayezid, and continues his work for the aging king because he has no other real options or allies, nor indeed does he have many pleasures. And as with "Sowers," the story concludes with a last confrontation between fighting man of the West and monarch of the east. In "Samarcand," though, the westerner slays Tamerlane. Howard cleverly writes Donald out of recorded history – for there is no record of a westerner slaying Tamerlane – yet still delivers us the ending he desires.

Reduced to an overview, the stories sound more similar in scope than they truly are; what they share more certainly are a bleak sense of hardship and loss, of victories won for priceless costs, of lives and empires tossed aside on whims. Even the mighty can fall, and fall they do when they overlook simple details, like the love of Donald for a simple slave girl who is not even true to him, or when they place trust in the wrong person, as does Bayazid when he relies upon Donald.

"Samarcand," like all the best of Howard's historicals, is an epic threaded with tragedy, showing us the sweep of battle sometimes from a distant vantage point and sometimes from a close-up. It compresses the span of years or months with a few choice phrases, and describes a relationship

between characters with a few well-turned conversations. The prose is gilt everywhere with words that are crystal clear and descriptive, beautiful even when it describes the fall of cities and the death of men.

Perhaps the grimmest of all these historicals is “The Lion of Tiberias.” No matter that Sir Miles and Ellen survive for a happy ending. Though it is the story of Sir Miles that pulls us onward through the narrative, it is the conqueror Zenghi who most fascinates. Brave, capable, even witty, we are shown contemptible cruelty at his hand at the story’s open. Yet Howard is too skilled to present us with a one-dimensional villain. Later we learn that the one action Zenghi regrets in his long life is the brutal death of young Achmet that so stuns the reader in the opening scene of “Tiberias.” Miles may be as clever and as accomplished as any of Howard’s protagonists, but it is Zenghi who we remember most when the tale is done. Like Baibars and Tamerlane, he is a lion among men who dares to mold the earth as his own. It is he who brings about his own downfall; he sets his own death in motion as surely as if he had slit his own throat, first by slaying the noble prince, then by sparing John Norwald. Once more Howard brings us a tale of the fall of kingdoms and the death of kings, but seldom has any writer delivered a conclusion so somber and otherworldly without resorting to the fantastic. When Zenghi’s advisor Ousama approaches the atabeg’s tent, he finds the unexpected.

> He stopped short, an uncanny fear prickling the short hairs at the back of his neck, as a form came from the pavilion. He made out a tall white-bearded man, clad in rags. The Arab stretched forth a hand timidly, but dared not touch the apparition. He saw that the figure’s hand was pressed against its left side, and blood oozed darkly from between the fingers.
>
> “Where go you, old man?” stammered the Arab, involuntarily stepping back as the white-bearded stranger fixed weird blazing eyes upon him.
>
> “I go back to the void which gave me birth,” answered the figure in a deep ghostly voice, and as the Arab stared in bewilderment, the stranger passed on with slow, certain, unwavering steps, to vanish in the darkness.

Once more the dreams of empire fade, and Ousama eloquently mourns his master when he discovers the body of Zenghi. “ ‘Alas for kingly ambitions and high visions!’ exclaimed the Arab. ‘Death is a black horse that may halt in the night by any tent, and life is more unstable than the foam on the sea!’ ” It is just one more memorable quote from a story that is laced with them.

In each of the last three stories, Howard has played variations upon one of his favorite themes; that we must eat and drink and be merry while we can, for death comes all too swiftly, even for the great.

While an eastern monarch again plays a leading role in the next of Howard’s historicals, Suleyman is much less the focus than Red Sonya and Gottfried von Kalmbach. It is probably well enough known now that Red Sonya has little in common with the comic-book character Red Sonja other than a similar name, red hair, and a skill with weapons. At no point during the length of the story does Howard’s Red Sonya don a chainmail bikini; she and von Kalmbach neatly steal the show without the use of gimmicks.

Life may be just as grim under “The Shadow of the Vulture” as it was amongst Tiberian Lions and Thunder Sowers, but Howard finds greater room for other tones within the work. Von Kalmbach is strong and courageous, but he’s a drunkard always out to enjoy himself a bit even if he’s doomed. He’s essentially good natured; the grim melancholy that has dogged the other male protagonists is mostly absent from von Kalmbach himself, although the environment he moves through is not so different. Howard avoids the temptation to make the character a comic sendup, though he does furnish von Kalmbach with a straight man in the person of Red Sonja, his brighter half. As much as von Kalmbach might desire it, he and Red Sonja do not become romantically linked, but they do recognize each other as two of the few who are competent enough to stand the walls, and she watches out for him. If not as explicitly intelligent as some of Howard’s other characters, Sonja can think on her feet, and it is her brains that save von Kalmbach and that set the final scheme in motion that finishes the vulture.

Suleyman, for all that he is portrayed as intelligent, does not fare as well; he comes across as cultured but a little petulant. His aims at conquest are thwarted, but he decides to celebrate the campaign’s failure as a success anyway, a point of irony from history that amused Howard. Though Suleyman does not die like the monarchs in the Howard historicals that

precede him – he would live on for many years yet – his evil henchman does, and surely Mikhal Oglu is the blackest figure yet used in these history tales, one who "recalled with satisfaction the blackened, corpse-littered wastes – the screams of tortured men – the cries of girls writhing in his iron arms; recalled with much the same sensation the death-shrieks of those same girls in the blood-fouled hands of his killers." There's nothing redeemable in the man but his efficiency. We feel no sympathy for either him or the haughty Suleyman come story end, when the two are face to face a final time.

"Vulture" is another epic, close on the heels of the three previous – four truly excellent historical adventures, all dashed off in a single year. It was quite an achievement. For once Howard himself voiced awareness of the story's worth. To Lovecraft he wrote that "… I do like 'The Shadow of the Vulture.' I tried to follow history as closely as possible, though I did shift the actual date of Mikhal Oglu's death. He was not killed until a year or so later, on the occasion of a later invasion of Austria, in which the Akinji were trapped and destroyed by Paul Bakics."

Howard was also proud of his characters, writing to Lovecraft in March of 1933 that "I'm curious to know how the readers will like Gottfried von Kalmbach, one of the main characters in a long historical yarn I sold Wright, concerning Suleyman the Magnificent's attack on Vienna. A more dissolute vagabond than Gottfried never weaved his drunken way across the pages of a popular magazine: wastrel, drunkard, gambler, whore-monger, renegade, mercenary, plunderer, thief, rogue, rascal – I never created a character whose creation I enjoyed more. They may not seem real to the readers; but Gottfried and his mistress Red Sonya seem more real to me than any other character I've ever drawn."

Truer or not – for by this point Howard had breathed convincing life into any number of characters – von Kalmbach and Red Sonya are some of his most compelling characters, and we can lament the fact that we never heard more from Howard about them. Von Kalmbach is not quite so dissolute as Howard paints him here; the fellow in the story is almost staid by comparison to the way he's described to Lovecraft. Those same words might better describe the protagonist of "Gates of Empire."

Some Howard fans name the run of work from "The Sowers of the Thunder" to "The Shadow of the Vulture" as Howard's historical high water mark, but "Gates of Empire" succeeds just as well. The fact that it is not

more widely celebrated, even among Howard fans, may be because it's different in style and tone from almost everything else in Howard's entire canon. It's not that details and events within the tale are any less grim than those of the historicals that come before it, but that the character who drunkenly weaves his way through all the blood and battle and death is another kind of fellow entirely. Howard was so confident now with the material that he was experimenting with construction and character; every historical from this point forward was a chance to further flex his muscles. Unfortunately we can only speculate as to what Howard might have gone on to write in the genre had the market not closed to him.

"Gates of Empire" is not the broad slapstick comedy of the Breckinridge Elkins stories. Giles is just this side of realism, and while a comic figure, is one who is constantly in danger. Not so Elkins, who will never be harmed. Throughout "Gates of Empire" Howard reveals a fine sense of comic timing and understatement. The pacing is brilliant. Guiscard de Chastillon always manages to arrive at just the worst, and most entertaining, moment. Sometimes the humor in the piece arises from characters having what would be a perfectly reasonable conversation if it were not completely based upon lies that Giles has told them about his own condition. A rogue, Giles is mostly harmless, and likable, clever enough to stay just ahead of any situation he's created for himself. Indeed, almost everything that befalls Giles comes of his own poor choices. His cleverness allows him to make lemonade every time he falls into a vat of lemons, but in climbing out of one barrel he nearly always manages to make another poor choice that leads him into another.

Following Giles is nothing like following Conan, who is usually one step ahead of the readers. With Giles, Howard lets us in on the joke. We're the superior to Giles in many ways, although few of us would be likely to lie so convincingly when the chips are down. As readers we know far better than Giles that the lovely girl leading him on through the darkness cannot possibly intend anything good for him; we have a greater understanding than Giles of exactly what he is up against in scene after scene and it creates a different kind of tension than Howard is famous for. Conan will surely get out of the scene via his prowess and intelligence, but how will Giles manage to avoid destruction this time? Dumb luck? More clever improvization? "Gates of Empire" is one of those stories that only improves upon revisiting.

Sadly, although it would have been nice to know what Howard thought of the story, or his progress as a writer, no surviving letter discusses either Giles or “Gates of Empire,” and he was never to write another piece quite like it.

A Final Flurry

“The Road of the Eagles” returned Howard to the driven men and the darker tone more typical of him, but he strove even further this time, presenting us with a host of characters, all at odds, each so compelling that we cannot help but root for all of them, even though we know that for any one of them to triumph the others will fail and almost surely die. In the first pages it may seem at first that Ivan’s mission of vengeance will be the story’s central focus, but before long we meet Osman Pasha, and after some time in his company his agile mind and capable arm win our admiration. On the run, he has no options left him until the girl Ayesha begs him for aid in freeing a prince who will surely grant a kingdom to him and his followers. The chief conflict falls between Ivan’s chase of Osman and Osman’s pursuit of his dream, but there is also the matter of Ayesha, who’s fallen in love with the Turkish prince and uses all the wiles and charms at her command to win his freedom. She is merciless but determined, and we cannot help but root for her success. Howard even allows us a glimpse of the prince’s potential, hashish-addled though he is: “But there were strong lines in his keen face, not yet erased by sloth and dissipation, and under the rich robe his limbs were cleancut and hard.” Even so minor a character as Kral, who desires to aid the Kazaks and avenge himself upon the Turkomans, is brought to life, and death.

Death awaits nearly everyone over the course of the story, Howard sending each of them neatly on their way to their ends with the precision of an accomplished tragedian. The only moment within the piece that really falters is the conclusion, where Ivan and Osman discover that they are old friends, far from home. After so many fine scenes, from the irony of the prince’s death moments before men arrive to liberate him to our final glimpse of Kral, this last one feels less like the concluding moment and more like one hammerstroke too many on the bell of futility. In Howard’s defense, though, it is hard to imagine the story ending happily for either character, and this conclusion, at least, is a surprise.

Almost incidentally, we see a final Lamb influence within this tale, for the speech of Ivan and his friends – sometimes the very cadence and rhythm of their words – is reminiscent of the talk and behavior of Ayub and Demid. By this point, though, Howard is not writing pastiche. He is like a fine

musician who has listened well to the playing of a piece and can effortlessly weave part of that theme into his own work.

In “The Road of the Eagles” Howard experimented with the rising and falling of fates of a whole host of characters and managed to make us care about all of them, despite the fact that none of them were explicitly good, or bad – although it might be conceded that “Ivan” is the least black-hearted among them, for all that he is a slayer like the others. “Hawks Over Egypt” is a return in some ways to the focus of Howard’s earlier historicals, although the twists and turns of the plot and its focus on a single span of days rather than a course of years is different from the epic sprawl of his four master tales (beginning with “The Sowers of the Thunder” and ending with “The Shadow of the Vulture”). Each of those four deals with the fall of cities and the death of kings – usually from their own hubris – the disintegration of empires or the dreams of those empires. Once Howard reaches “Gates of Empire” the events within take place over no more than a span of months. “The Shadow of the Vulture” might be said to look back toward its three predecessors and forward – with its greater focus upon character and telescoped narrative – toward the next. But then there are seldom clear boundary lines in any discussion of fiction, be it genre definition or periods and phases of an author’s work.

It must be noted, too, that these last three complete historicals – “The Road of the Eagles,” “Hawks Over Egypt,” and “The Road of Azrael” – did not see print within Howard’s lifetime. Likely that was because, in the depths of the depression, *Oriental Stories* did not generate enough income to survive, even with a name change to *Magic Carpet*. Howard had created a backlog of stories that didn’t see print, despite the efforts of Otis A. Kline, his agent. He was to write nothing more in a similar vein, and once claimed that writing the historicals took far too much time. One wonders, though, if Howard might have plunged forward into a genre for which he clearly had a natural talent had there been more markets. Could he have been putting the best face on a bad situation when his historical markets dried up? Clearly he loved the study of history and found rich inspiration for stories whenever he read of it. A letter to H. P. Lovecraft in April of 1932 bears witness:

> I read with much interest and appreciation your speculations on the possible trend of history, in the event of the destruction of Rome by the Gauls; they seem to have considered all possible

> angles. Continuing with these theoretical wanderings: suppose that Martel had not stopped the Arabs at Tours? Or that Tamerlane or Genghis Khan had conquered Europe? Or, speculating from the other way, suppose that Alexander the Great had conquered India, and pressing on, subjugated the Cathayan empire? Would the East have been Aryanized, or the Western races sunk that much quicker in a mire of Orientalism? And suppose the Black Prince had carried out his dream of Oriental conquest? He was probably the only Western general of medieval times capable of holding his own with the great Eastern conquerors. In fact, I am convinced that, with his English archers, he would have proven more than a match for Tamerlane, Genghis Khan, Baibars, Subotai, Saladin, or any of the rest. The main reason that the Crusaders and other western armies were so repeatedly defeated and overthrown by the Moslems and Mongols was partly because of the extreme mobility of the Oriental armies, partly because of the incredible inefficiency of the western kings and generals.

In this exchange we can see a brief glimpse of viewpoints that are likely to strike modern readers as politically incorrect, but we cannot castigate a man for being a part of his own time rather than ours. Howard's views on race were hardly unique to him; what were then considered scientific discussions of race were all the vogue in Howard's day, and before the rise of the Nazis, discussion of the Aryan race as superior did not have the same sinister connotations that we experience today at the mere mention of the concept. Howard's own views on race seem almost to have more of a "home-town" pride feel to them than anything else; in that same letter to Lovecraft, Howard writes: "I'll swear, I've written of Christian armies being defeated by Moslems until my blood fairly seethes with rage. Some day I must write of the success of the earlier Crusades to gratify my racial vanity."

Anyone truly familiar with Howard's work can find heroic characters of different cultures and races fairly easily, even if they are painted in stereotype at other times. "Hawks Over Egypt" contains several minor moments where modern readers are likely to feel discomfort – for example there is a scene where the Emir Othman is described in terms no one would

dare write today: “He shrank back like a great black ape, his eyes burning red, his dusky hands opening and closing in helpless blood-lust.” The blacks in the story are dealt with far more superficially – and with more exaggerated language – than are the rest of the factions.

An exhaustive discussion of the racial outlook of a Texan from the 1930s is beyond the scope of this essay and my own expertise. We should probably be more surprised that, when viewing Howard’s entire body of work, someone from his time and region is relatively open to the idea that a brave and honorable man can be found from any race, than we are surprised that his prose is sometimes colored with racial language typical of his time.

“Hawks Over Egypt” begins with one of the most memorable moments in Howard’s canon, as de Guzman and Al Adfhal meet upon the street just as killers close on Al Adfhal. Howard is reaching for the same complex mix of relatable characters that he worked with in “The Road of the Eagles”; we are presented with intrigues, double-crosses, exotic color, and thrilling battle scenes – but then Howard excels with battle scenes even in his rough drafts. For all of these strengths, “Hawks” never succeeds quite as well as “Road of Eagles” because we are never made to care about the characters and their desires and fates as much as we do in “The Road of the Eagles.” But whereas “The Road of the Eagles” rises to a crescendo then loses power in its final moment, it is in its conclusion that “Hawks Over Egypt” truly excels. Some of the best scenes in the whole of the story are with the depiction of the mad Al Hakim. Indeed, Howard even anticipates a more famous moment, as he has Zaida declare Al Hakim’s godhood to save her life. Robert Graves uses the same trick when Claudius recognizes that Caligula has become a god in *I, Claudius* some years later.

Despite Al-Hakim’s madness, and despite knowing that his death will make things much safer for millions of people, Howard evokes tragedy at the moment of his death. Zaida’s moment of vengeance, a scene we would have expected to feel was deeply deserved, suddenly seems cruel, as the man who thought he was a god is left to die alone under the stars … and a strange legend is born. It’s powerful stuff, and far stronger than what has come in the pages before.

My favorite of these last three post–*Magic Carpet* stories is the “Road of Azrael.” Although there are fine moments in all three, and “The Road of the Eagles” approaches greatness, it is the “The Road of Azrael” to which I have most often returned. It does not matter to me that the prose has more

of a purple tinge than the other stories; it's a grand adventure that starts out at a gallop and never lets up. Howard's Chatagai narrator is brave, resourceful, a little full of himself, and very charming. Despite the fact that his temper or sense of honor can make him reckless, Kosru Malik possesses a shrewd intellect and has personal insight. His dialogue and thoughts drip with witty asides. In short, he's a flawed narrator we can't help but like, which is a huge strength for any piece of fiction. The skeptical reader can scoff at the coincidental meeting between Kosru Malik and Eric de Cogan and their past history, but an intelligent reader accepts the moment and rides with them into their mad adventure. There are moments of grim realism within, and of tragedy – the fate of Muhammad Khan, who throws his life and future away solely over lust for a Frankish girl. Kosru Malik sees greatness in him even in their final moment, as they battle: " 'Muhammad Khan, why be a fool? What is a Frankish girl to you, who might be emperor of half the world? Without you Kizilshehr will fall, will crumble to dust. Go your way and leave the girl to my brother-in-arms.'

"But he only laughed as a madman laughs and tore his scimitar free."

Hubris destroys Muhammad Khan just as it has destroyed other leaders within Howard's historicals. Yet while it's a fine moment, it is not the one we remember, as the death of a ruler is perhaps the most resonant scene in three of the four most famous of these historicals. When we experience "The Road of Azrael," what stands out the most is the brotherhood between the two characters and the friction that results from the different viewpoints of their shared struggle. We remember Kosru Malik's little throwaway comments, such as "He cursed me beneath his breath as is the custom of Franks when a sensible course is suggested to them …" and the moment when the pair stumble upon a group of Vikings shepherding none other than King Harold. Who else but Howard could have conceived of such a moment and pulled it off? By that scene in the story we are so invested in the characters that what might have seemed absurd in someone else's hands becomes inspired storytelling, no matter its improbability. With "The Road of Azrael," Howard meant to introduce us to characters we care about, transport us into a distant land and time, and relentlessly pull us forward into adventure. He gives us moments of humor, poignancy, romance, and tension, and heaps of vividly described action. He achieves all these goals and makes it seem effortless; at the conclusion we cannot help but feel satisfaction at a tale well told, and key moments remain at the forefront of

our imaginations, like the afterimage on a television monitor, or the lingering taste of a great wine when the glass is drained.

Unpublished and Unfinished Works

Anyone who writes regularly is likely to end up with a few fragments, especially someone who writes professionally. Like an artist sketching out characters or environments before starting on the final drawing, or a sculptor making studies in clay before starting in marble, authors make initial drafts as they're exploring a story. Someone who's practiced and gifted, like Robert E. Howard, is likely to produce roughs that are quite polished, but a professional experimenting with different markets and story concepts ends up with false starts and fragments that were put aside because they weren't quite working. Howard's early death had nothing to do with the incomplete state of the fragments in this collection; they were abandoned for other reasons.

As I've already stated, I think analysis of fragments for literary worth somewhat problematic – naturally they will have flaws that a finished work will not. In the case of the fragments included in this volume, "The Slave-Princess" is the most compelling, and perhaps the only one that practically begs for completion. "The Track of Bohemund" has stirring moments and fine action scenes and it may be that had it been completed we would have seen another success, but it lies unfinished, and Howard himself might have sensed that something was missing. It does not seem to rise to the heights of the completed historicals from "The Sowers of the Thunder" on.

The other fragments seem to have come from earlier in Howard's writing career. We have his summary and recap of Lamb's "The Wolf Chaser," a tale that clearly captivated him, judging both by these fragments, his brief foray into a tale with the same characters, and the similar conclusion to "Red Blades of Black Cathay." Howard was probably experimenting with the aspects of the story he most wanted to learn from.

In addition to numerous tantalizing fragments, at the time of his death Howard had a bevy of fine stories and partial series that he never saw in print. Wandering through one of them is Turlogh Dubh O'brien, one of the best realized of Howard's lesser known heroes and one of my personal favorites; I heartily wish Howard had composed more stories of the Irish rogue. Wherever he turns up, he tends to steal scenes through sheer force of personality, as he does in "Spears of Clontarf."

When “Spears” failed to sell, Howard upped the quotient of the fantastic, retitled it “The Grey God Passes,” and tried, and failed, again to sell the piece. “Spears” is quite similar to “Grey God,” save that it begins with the slaying of Conn’s master and has a little too much story development through dialogue. When Howard cut this opening and replaced it with a brief glimpse of the All-Father, he improved the story.

Clontarf gives us an early glimpse of Howard’s ability to portray multiple characters in battle scenes. It works very well, even though it does not succeed quite as well as it does in his later historicals. Still, Howard at good is better than most adventure writers at their best, and it is hard to find much fault with the piece except in comparison to Howard’s own later and greater work. It seems strange to us now that the story, be it titled “Spears of Clontarf” or “The Grey God Passes,” did not sell in Howard’s lifetime.

Turlogh turned up as a central character in two more stories – one of which is often mentioned among Howard’s best (“The Dark Man”) and popped up in a few fragments, but Howard lost interest in him, or failed to find more stories to tell of him, and moved on. A different fate was to befall another of his promising heroes, Agnès de la Fère.

We can’t be certain when Howard wrote the Dark Agnès stories, although we can be certain that he set them to paper before January 1935, when he sent “Sword Woman” to C. L. Moore. Catherine Moore is well-known in fantasy circles and especially among fans of *Weird Tales* for creating a cycle of stories around space opera hero Northwest Smith, and for her tales of Jirel of Joiry. It is likely that the latter, featuring a flame-haired warrior woman of a mythical province of France, inspired Howard’s letter, though we should not leap to the conclusion that Jirel inspired Agnès.

Superficially Agnès and Jirel sound similar. They are both red-haired warrior women and French – but they are poles apart. There are obvious differences: Jirel is a noble and Agnès a peasant; Agnès narrates her story while Jirel’s adventures are told in third person; Jirel’s adventures have fantastic elements from almost the very start, whereas it is only in the Agnès fragment that the supernatural makes an entrance.

A greater difference than these elements, however, is one of tone. Howard and Moore were both of them splendid writers and Howard at least was capable of a variety of different styles. Here, though, he was direct and forceful, even a little spare, especially when compared to the often glorious prose poetry sprinkled through his best historical pieces. The two complete

Agnès stories thunder forward at breakneck pace. Moore writes with a dreamy sensuality somewhat reminiscent of William Hope Hodgson's best work, for mixed in among the surreal imagery are moments of horror and tension. Howard was perfectly capable of this tone as well, as his Kull stories bear witness, but he did not use it when he wrote of Agnès de la Fère.

If Moore influenced Howard in any way it is not really discernable, and it may be that he sent the stories her way because he sensed a kindred spirit, or because he wanted her to see he'd done something a little similar but hadn't been stealing from her. Perhaps he contacted her for a bit of both reasons; we can only speculate.

What we do know is that Moore replied that she'd enjoyed Agnès, and that Howard never found a market for the series. He might have been considering altering them for *Weird Tales* – which would surely have required the fantastic element he introduces in the unfinished "Mistress of Death."

The completed Agnès stories read like the first two chapters of a serial novel, or, perhaps more aptly, like the first two episodes of a radio or television drama. The main characters are introduced in an origin story, and so too is a villain who survives both adventures. It's a shame we can't know where Howard was planning to take the series. Presumably he had some idea, but no series outlines survive.

What we can clearly see is evidence to counter one of the critiques sometimes leveled against Howard's work. No misogynist could have penned a tale with such a valiant heroine. She outwits and outfights any man who stands against her, and is of higher moral fiber besides, sparing Villiers, who would have betrayed her, then risking her life to save him and reigniting his own sense of honor.

Howard should not be faulted if Agnès and her companions are painted in more primary colors than the figures in his more famous historicals. Howard was capable of greater variety than his detractors give him credit for. Agnès comes from a pulpier and more melodramatic tradition, and she can stand shoulder to shoulder with similar heroes. Howard crafted his tales for market requirements. His writing was his living, after all, and it may be that's why his women often were little more than verbal eye candy. It helped his stories sell. He wrote what sold in the market, and the fact that these fine tales of a heroic female adventurer never saw print are testimony

that the wider world, or at least the gatekeeping editors, were not yet ready for the more egalitarian tales Howard was perfectly capable of, and comfortable with, giving us.

Trail's End

Many writers have left their readers wanting more before they rode into the sunset, frequently because they had a popular character or series that readers could not get enough of. One of many fascinating things about Robert E. Howard's writing is that he managed to pull this trick not once, not twice, but for almost as many series and genres as he worked with. The craving for more Conan stories fired an entire industry of (mostly bad) pastiche based around the character, and now there is an entire role-playing game as well as an online multiverse so that others can walk into the mighty Cimmerian's world and find their own adventures. But readers don't just desire more tales of Conan – they want more Solomon Kane, more Kull, more Bran Mak Morn. And there are lesser known characters as well that we would gladly have glimpsed more of – El Borak, Turlogh, Dark Agnès – the list goes on, and if one reflects upon the length of that list and then upon both the relatively short time Howard was creating professional writing and the immense amount of prose he produced over those years, his accomplishment is all the more impressive. He gave us a great deal of fiction, and yet left us still hungry. He was only thirty when he died, a point I like to raise when critics speak to an immaturity they see in his themes or prose. Given that he was already *this* good when he was thirty, and given he was only getting better, what more could we have seen from him had he lived for ten, twenty, forty years more? When we mourn Howard we should not just regret the passing of a brilliant young man, but the loss of all that he might have lived to give us.

One of those things, I'm certain, would have been more quality historical stories. If his letters and accounts of conversations in the final months of his life are any judge, those historicals were likely to have been westerns, but Howard may have returned to other genres as well. Sadly, we can never know. We should take solace, though, in the excellence of the work Howard left us. It is my hope that this volume will help acquaint both Howard fans and curious newcomers with some of the finest work in his canon. It has been unfairly overshadowed by that featuring his more famous characters and perhaps at last will find the audience it has long deserved.

* Weinberg, Robert, “The Long Journey of the Morning Star,” in *Swords from the West*, pp. xiii–xiv.

Notes on the Original Howard Texts

The texts for this edition of *Sword Woman and Other Historical Adventures* were prepared by Rusty Burke, with the assistance of Rob Roehm, Paul Herman, Glenn Lord, Patrice Louinet, and the Cross Plains (Texas) Public Library. The stories have been checked either against Howard's original manuscripts and typescripts, copies of which were provided by Lord or the Cross Plains Public Library, or the first published appearance if a manuscript or typescript was unavailable. Every effort has been made to present the work of Robert E. Howard as faithfully as possible.

Deviations from the original sources are detailed in these textual notes. In the following notes, page, line, and word numbers are given as follows: 1.15.12, indicating page 1, fifteenth line, twelfth word. Story titles, chapter numbers and titles, breaks before after chapter headings, titles, and illustrations are not counted. The page/line/word number will be followed by the reading in the original source, or a statement indicating the type of change made. Punctuation changes may be indicated by giving the immediately preceding word followed by the original punctuation.

We have standardized chapter numbering and titling: Howard's own practices varied, as did those of the publications in which these stories appeared. We have not noted those changes here.

French names in these stories have been given their correct forms (or as nearly correct as possible) by Patrice Louinet. Howard did not have even elementary French, and some of his names (for instance, "d'Valence") are simply impossible. We have made a note of these changes at the beginning of the notes for the stories in which they occurred, but have not documented each occurrence throughout the story.

Throughout these stories, certain of Howard's preferred spellings have been used even when editors of the magazines in which the stories appeared changed them. Hence we have used "scimitar" throughout, rather than "simitar," "bazaar" rather than "bazar," etc. Such changes are noted.

Please note that locations below refer to print ISBN 978-0-345-50546-0.

Spears of Clontarf

Text taken from Howard's typescript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. 1.15.12: comma rather than period after "son"; 2.10.7: save that of; 2.12.7: no hyphen; 2.22.10: comma rather than period after "frankly"; 2.30.11: comma rather than period after "boldly"; 2.37.2: Do; 2.38.9: comma rather than period after "calmly"; 3.40.12: semicolon rather than comma after "began"; 4.9.5: "haste" not in original; 4.13.7: no hyphen; 4.16.3: comma rather than period after "threats"; 4.27.10: comma rather than period after "horseman"; 4.30.8: comma rather than period after "wanderer"; 5.2.6: conciousness; 5.4.1: no comma after "driftwood"; 5.7.11: comma rather than period after "kern"; 5.9.7: comma rather than period after "Dunlang"; 5.10.4: more weightier; 5.12.3: comma rather than period after "Conn"; 5.14.7: comma rather than period after "Dunlang"; 5.38.2: no comma after "Conn"; 5.38.3: unconciously; 6.1.13: comma rather than period after "angrily"; 6.13.7: comma rather than period after "Dunlang"; 6.21.9: comma rather than period after "his"; 6.25.6: statue; 6.31.10: period outside the quotation mark; 6.32.9: comma rather than period after "embrace"; 7.1.7: comma rather than period after "dully"; 7.6.3: "until" not in original; 7.11.11: comma rather than period after "sun"; 7.32.4: My; 7.36.1: comma rather than period after "passionately"; 7.39.6: comma rather than period after "Dunlang"; 8.1.10: comma rather than period after "answered"; 8.17.5: comma rather than period after "answered"; 8.18.12: comma rather than period after "gently"; 9.10.7: hyphen following colon; 9.17.9: statue; 10.8.5: Here; 10.14.3: comma rather than period after "said"; 10.16.6: comma rather than period after "stolidly"; 10.20.9: comma rather than period after "boldly"; 10.32.5: comma rather than period after "repeated"; 10.39.5: comma rather than period after "Conn"; 11.2.1: comma rather than period after "brusquely"; 11.5.3: comma rather than period after "grimly"; 11.8.8: comma rather than period after "Brian"; 11.13.5: It; 11.27.13: no comma after "priest"; 11.33.1: Your; 12.6.2: no hyphen; 12.31.11: comma rather than period after "moodily"; 13.3.8: comma rather than period after "sombrely"; 13.7.2: statue; 13.11.1: It; 13.17.14: comma rather than period after "grip"; 13.20.10: comma rather than period after "grasp"; 13.22.4: comma rather than period after

“snarled”; 13.29.3: comma rather than period after “snarled”; 13.37.3: But; 14.2.3: dire; 14.3.6: comma rather than period after “her”; 14.5.6: comma rather than period after “bitterly”; 14.10.12: comma rather than period after “teeth”; 14.19.4: comma rather than period after “recoiling”; 14.27.11: comma rather than period after “girl”; 14.33.6: comma rather than period after “Eevin”; 15.5.11: comma rather than period after “disgust”; 15.10.11: no comma after “and”; 15.15: no section break; 15.20.8: comma rather than period after “provoked”; 15.29.2: comma rather than period after “wearily”; 16.13.11: comma rather than period after “tranquilly”; 16.22.12: no comma after “grinned”; 16.25.1: comma rather than period after “Dalcassian”; 17.16.7: comma after “Lennox”; 17.20.3: devision; 17.23.3: within in him; 17.25.8: devisions; 17.33.12: devisions; 18.8.14: comma rather than period after “call”; 18.18.12: comma rather than period after “Murrogh”; 18.41.5: no hyphen; 19.18.1: comma rather than period after “silver”; 19.20.12: no comma after “tall”; 19.23.4: no comma after “in”; 20.25.8: no hyphen; 21.9.1: comma after “Dubhgall”; 21.21.5: comma rather than period after “fiercely”; 21.34.11: cuiras; 21.35.6: comma after “armor”; 22.3.11: comma rather than period after “eyes”; 22.9.8: comma rather than period after “paw”; 22.11.6: comma rather than period after “strokes”; 22.23.6: My; 22.32.4: It; 23.3.7: comma rather than period after “Turlogh”; 24.7.3: comma rather than period after “Sigurd”; 24.8.5: comma rather than period after “Asmund”; 24.10.4: comma rather than period after “desperately”; 24.12.4: comma rather than period after “left”; 27.37.12: devided; 28.37.10: comma rather than period after “whispered”; 29.17.5: What; 29.18.8: comma rather than period after “Conn”; 29.21.3: comma rather than period after “cloud”; 30.8.4: no comma after “down”; 31.6.12: comma rather than period after “Dubh”; 31.13.9: comma rather than period after “arms”

Hawks Over Egypt

Text taken from Howard’s typescript, a copy of which was provided by the Cross Plains Public Library. The typescript has penciled editorial markings that do not appear to be in Howard’s hand. These have been disregarded in the preparation of this text. 33.8.1: “khalat” is not underlined (i.e., not italic); 34.9.4: eye-balls; 34.21.12: oponent’s; 37.39.2: Beber; 38.18.7: life-time; 38.36.10: started; 39.36.13: comma after “brand”; 40.6.1: langurous; 41.31.6: Beneficient; 41.33.2: withold; 43.19.6: trandscending; 50.7.1: no

ending quotation marks; 51.3.9: muezzin (not underlined/italicized); 51.4.10: *mullah* (underlined); 51.16.4: colon after “of”; 55.5.7: filagreed; 56.13.15: erst-while; 58.24.11: “the” not in original; 61.2.14: “accompan-” at end of page, “-inied” on first line of next page; 61.12.3: near-by; 62.30.11: has; 65.2.8: awkening; 65.15.1: sheers; 66.1.5: warcry; 66.20.1: freized; 67.30.6: “the” not in original

The Outgoing of Sigurd the Jerusalem-Farer

Text taken from *Verses in Ebony* (George T. Hamilton and Dale Brown, 1975). No changes have been made for this edition.

The Road of Azrael

Text taken from Howard’s typescript, a copy of which was provided by the Cross Plains Public Library. 71.18.8: “maker” has been typed in above the line, with a slash mark to indicate insertion after “tent,” but there is no hyphen; 73.26.10: two periods after “torch”; 74.9.10: We; 74.15.6: statue; 74.16.6: But; 74.17.4: We; 75.32.3: comma rather than period after “he”; 75.34.7: comma rather than period after “I”; 76.16.14: comma rather than period after “I”; 76.24.4: comma rather than period after “I”; 76.30.9: comma rather than period after “impatience”; 76.34.14: neice; 77.11.8: comma rather than period after “continued”; 77.27.1: comma rather than period after “answered”; 77.31.3: comma rather than period after “repeated”; 78.17.8: squalied; 79.25.6: comma rather than period after “I”; 79.29.9: comma rather than period after “I”; 79.33.10: Where-ever; 80.18.10: comma rather than period after “muttered”; 80.28.3: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 80.32.2: furtherest; 80.33.11: furtherest; 81.1.4: comma rather than period after “whispered”; 81.15.6: comma rather than period after “growled”; 81.21.10: comma rather than period after “impatiently”; 82.12.6: comma rather than period after “he”; 82.19.7: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 82.20.6: reenforcements; 83.1.14: reenforcements; 83.17.4: statue; 83.28.9: comma rather than period after “him”; 84.6.7: comma rather than period after “uneasily”; 84.19.5: comma rather than period after “one”; 84.20.5: Spies; 84.29.10: comma rather than period after “bitterly”; 84.33.5: comma rather than period after “snarled”; 85.19.5: We; 85.29.5: comma rather than period after “Yurzed”; 85.33.13:

comma rather than period after “he”; 86.5.1: Light; 86.8.7: comma rather than period after “irony”; 86.13.1: comma rather than period after “dislike”; 86.15.7: To; 86.31.5: comma rather than period after “cursed”; 86.39.2: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 87.8.11: neice; 87.11.4: comma rather than period after “he”; 87.24.2: If; 87.27.7: But; 88.12.7: comma rather than period after “suggested”; 93.8.15: comma rather than period after “morning”; 93.11.12: You; 93.13.5: comma rather than period after “I”; 93.15.1: line begins with double quotation marks; 93.15.3: single rather than double quotation mark; 93.16.1: line begins with single quotation mark; 93.17.1: line begins with single quotation mark; 93.17.12: line ends with single quotation mark; 93.18.7: single rather than double quotation mark; 93.18.12: line ends with single and double quotation marks; 93.35.13: marvellously; 94.7.4: comma rather than period after “muttered”; 94.9.5: comma rather than period after “answer”; 94.16.9: None; 94.19.2: comma after “too”; 94.20.10: comma rather than period after “wearily”; 95.26.8: edge; 96.16.3: horrizons; 96.28.2: comma rather than period after “Eric’s”; 96.28.6: Thorwald’sson; 96.30.8: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 96.32.12: comma rather than period after “wearily”; 96.39.12: comma rather than period after “slowly”; 97.1.4: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 97.3.5: comma rather than period after “son”; 97.6.12: comma rather than period after “he”; 97.18.13: comma rather than period after “trumpet”; 97.24.1: comma rather than period after “spleen”; 97.28.7: comma rather than period after “stammered”; 97.32.7: comma rather than period after “snarled”; 97.40.1: no hyphen; 97.41.1: comma rather than period after “rasped”; 98.5.4: Under; 98.8.6: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 98.10.10: comma rather than period after “Saxon”; 98.19.8: comma rather than period after “son”; 98.24.1: comma rather than period after “Hrothgar”; 98.25.9: comma rather than period after “Eric”; 98.27.9: comma after “him”; 98.28.7: comma rather than period after “Hrothgar”; 98.33.1: comma rather than period after “bell”; 98.40.7: comma rather than period after “softly”; 99.3.6: comma rather than period after “Hrothgar”; 99.5.5: comma rather than period after “ancient”; 99.6.11: comma rather than period after “eyes”; 99.9.9: comma rather than period after “Harold”; 99.24.11: league; 100.10.8: comma rather than period after “dream”; 100.18.5: Thorwald’sson; 100.28.9: comma rather than period after “he”; 100.30.4: comma rather than period after “I”; 101.21.6: That; 101.34.6: no comma after “Hrothgar”; 102.6.6: comma after “of”; 103.7.10: was;

103.18.6: But; 103.21.7: And; 104.40.10: comma rather than period after “said”; 105.8.7: You; 105.19.3: comma rather than period after “I”

The Lion of Tiberias

Text taken from *The Magic Carpet Magazine,* July 1933. 107.2.8: Calif; 109.5.5: simitar; 110.3.5: simitar; 111.25.4: Calif; 112.18.5: simitar; 112.29.11: for ever; 114.7.12: simitar; 115.13.5: Calif; 117.9.6: simitar; 122.8.4: simitar; 125.22.7: comma rather than colon after “him”; 125.39.7: practise; 127.20.12: Calif; 127.30.3: hell; 128.3.4: simitars; 130.18.10: comma after “fear”; 130.22.13: angel

Gates of Empire

Text taken from *Golden Fleece,* January 1939. 141.20.5: no opening quotation mark before “I”; 145.7.8: mêlée; 147.25.11: ending quotation mark after “pass”; 147.38.7: mêlée; 156.6.3: Cæsarea; 156.17.5: Cæsarea; 156.22.1: Cæsarea; 160.15.3: Some one; 160.38.1: Some one; 160.41.7: Some one; 163.2.14: Skirkuh; 166.26.6: mêlée

Hawks of Outremer

Text taken from *Oriental Stories,* Spring 1931. 169.1.1: line begins with opening double quotation marks; 169.8.7: line ends with closing double quotation marks; 169.10.2: the; 174.26.3: sheihk’s; 174.27.5: Von; 175.2.8: sheihk; 175.31.7: Von; 176.21.2: Von; 176.25.2: Von; 176.34.10: Von; 176.40.5: Von; 177.3.6: Von; 177.13.6: sheihk; 177.17.2: Von; 178.5.16: bazar; 179.17.17: Von; 179.25.7: plateaus; 180.18.11: simitar; 181.40.7: Christian’s; 183.4.4: Von; 183.23.3: simitar; 186.19.11: near by; 186.26.3: simitar; 187.1.11: vertebræ; 188.9.7: simitar; 188.17.10: semicolon rather than comma after “eyes”; 188.21.1: sheihk; 188.23.10: Von; 188.33.11: simitar; 189.1.13: simitar; 189.22.1: comma after “slender”; 190.41.5: sheihk; 193.9.2: sheihk’s; 193.13.3: comma after “Crusaders”; 195.14.12: practised; 195.27.1: Califs

The Blood of Belshazzar

Text taken from *Oriental Stories*, Fall 1931. 198.30.4–5: commas after “center” and “lay”; 198.30.10: comma after “helmet”; 200.2.10: simitars; 201.23.1: simitar; 203.22.2: Truks; 207.30.10: his; 207.41.5: Cromac’s; 209.3.6: some one; 210.7.7: simitar; 210.36.2: Zenor; 211.30.11: simitar; 211.38.5: exclamation point rather than question mark; 211.41.4: simitar; 212.26.5: comma rather than period after “angrily”; 212.26.6: where; 212.40.8: simitar; 213.7.4: comma rather than period after “howled”; 213.7.5: the; 213.40.10: simitar; 215.14.4: comma rather than period after “mind”; 215.14.5: it; 215.15.1: no comma after “Skol”; 215.17.1: simitar; 215.34.11: simitar; 219.3.10: Yusseff; 219.13.6: simitar; 219.37.1: simitar; 220.32.9: Cormac’s; 220.36.1: your’s; 223.7.8: simitar; 223.10.12: simitar

Red Blades of Black Cathay

Text taken from *Oriental Stories*, February–March 1931. 226.22.9: simitar; 226.31.8: simitars; 227.11.13: lapis-lazuli; 229.36.6: comma rather than period after “glory”; 229.36.7: here; 232.1.1: line begins with opening double quotation marks; 232.5.5: line ends with closing double quotation marks; 232.6.1: period after “Chesterton”; 232.9.14: lapis-lazuli; 232.28.11: any one; 233.32.11: simitar; 234.10.4: lapis-lazuli; 236.35.5: near-by; 237.6.1: line begins with opening double quotation marks; 237.11.5: line ends with closing double quotation marks; 237.12.1: period after “Chesterton”; 237.34.2: old; 238.17.10: simitars; 239.22.1: simitars; 244.11.2: simitar; 244.17.13: simitar; 245.1.9: simitars; 245.14.5: simitars; 246.34.10: simitar; 247.24.4: vizors; 247.39.1: comma after “He”; 248.4.2: reigned; 248.16.3: reigned

The Sowers of the Thunder

Text taken from *Oriental Stories*, Winter 1932. 253.9.1–4: no indication title is to be italicized; 253.9.4: period after “Baibars”; 253.11.4: bazars; 256.11.12: he; 259.23.2: bazars; 260.33.10: simitar; 261.12.3: traveller; 261.30.5: mullahs; 261.30.8: muezzin; 267.7.7: comma rather than period after “prince”; 270.40.3: simitar; 274.24.1: simitar; 274.40.1: simitar; 275.40.4: no comma after “Akbar”; 279.4.6: simitars; 280.15.1: no hyphen; 280.15.4: simitars; 280.19.9: line ends with closing double quotation marks; 281.34.5: simitar; 282.19.8: for ever; 284.23.10: simitars; 284.35.5: simitar;

285.2.16: mêlée; 285.40.8: mêlée; 287.11.10: for ever; 288.10.13: simitar; 289.1.9: semicolon rather than period after “Baibars”

The Skull in the Clouds

Text taken from *The Howard Collector,* Spring 1962. Howard began each line of dialogue with double quotation marks. We have retained only those that begin a character’s dialogue (291.3.1, 291.18.1, and 292.10.1) and those at the beginning of stanzas.

A Thousand Years Ago

Text taken from *Night Images* (The Morning Star Press, 1976). No changes have been made for this edition.

Lord of Samarcand

Text taken from *Oriental Stories,* Spring 1932. 295.22.6: mêlée; 298.25.1: simitar; 299.7.2: Ballad; 299.7.4: period after “Otterbourne”; 300.19.11: bazars; 301.7.10: simitars; 301.34.9: mêlée; 303.29.11: mêlée; 304.25.1: “The” not in original; 304.25.4: period after “Otterbourne”; 308.24.1: “The” not in original; 308.24.4: period after “Otterbourne”; 311.5.1: “Kipling” in italics, period following; 312.24.2: simitars; 313.6.5: simitar; 313.9.8: simitars; 313.16.8: simitars; 313.24.12: simitars; 313.27.3: mêlée; 313.35.1: POE; 313.35.2: period after “Tamerlane”; 318.9.1: POE; 318.9.2: period after “Tamerlane”; 320.32.7: “to” not in original; 321.30.3: simitar; 323.35.1: “The” not in original; 323.35.4: period after “Otterbourne”; 326.5.1: POE; 326.5.2: period after “Tamerlane”

Timur-Lang

Text taken from *The Howard Collector,* Summer 1964. No changes have been made for this edition.

Sword Woman

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. Howard's names have been rendered into correct French forms (insofar as possible) with guidance from Patrice Louinet. Throughout this story, as well as *Blades for France*, Howard's "Agnes" has been rendered "Agnès"; "de La Fere" is "de la Fère"; "Francois" is "François"; "Etienne" is "Étienne"; "Alencon" is "Alençon"; "d'Valence" is "de Valence." These changes will not be noted in each place they appear. 331.5.10: no hyphen; 331.16.10: practise; 332.10.5: semicolon rather than comma after "muttered"; 333.5.6: some one; 333.22.12: no comma after "tall"; 335.9.9: semicolon rather than comma after "retorted"; 337.5.3: Ives; 337.24.3: no comma after "besides"; 338.30.10: T'is; 339.30.11: Gerard; 340.7.13: no hyphen; 340.17.3: Michele; 340.37.6: no hyphen; 341.27.15: some one; 341.33.4: inn keeper; 342.10.2: no hyphen; 342.20.2: semicolon rather than comma after "voice"; 342.27.15: inn keeper; 342.29.12–13: the Duc; 343.9.13–15: the Duke of Alencon; 343.24.12: Orleans; 343.30.6: no comma after "knell"; 343.34.10: semicolon rather than comma after "say"; 344.27.4: semicolon rather than comma after "whimpered"; 344.28.6: laugh; 344.37.4: sombrely; 345.9.5: inn-keeper; 345.15.9: inn keeper; 345.35.1: no comma after "Then"; 346.19.7: semicolon rather than comma after "cap"; 346.23.2: inn keeper; 347.6.7: semicolon rather than comma after "host"; 347.11.5: to night; 347.30.14: semicolon rather than comma after "men"; 347.37.11: Etienne's; 348.17.9–11: the Duc d'Alencon; 348.33.16: "their" not in original; 349.10.1–4: title not italicized, period follows; 349.33.5: comma after "women"; 350.38.9: semicolon rather than comma after "morosely"; 351.3.7: ee'n; 352.2.9–11: the Duc d'Alencon; 353.27.12: no hyphen; 354.21.1–5: title not italicized, period follows; 354.31.1: Cans't; 355.9.12: on to; 357.34.4: for ever; 358.37.4: futiley; 361.6.5: semicolon rather than comma after "covert"; 362.30.1: inn keeper; 363.7.1: Orleans

Blades for France

Text taken from Howard's original typescripts, copies of which were provided by Glenn Lord. There exist two incomplete drafts for this story. One consists of pages 1–11 of what seems to have been a second draft, with chapter titles given: This draft ends shortly after the beginning of the second chapter. The other draft consists of pages 2–25 and has no chapter

titles: this, and other internal evidence, suggests that it was a first draft. We have used what we have identified as the second draft for our text until it ended, and from that point have used the first draft text. See the note for *Sword Woman* regarding names. In addition to those mentioned there, in this story “Francoise” has been rendered “Françoise”; “Francis” is “François”; “Louise of Savoy” is “Louise de Savoie.” 365.14.3: near-by; 366.1.4: oggled; 366.8.14: garment; 366.9.3: garbs; 366.19.5–9: text has been erased and retyped over, this is probable reading; 367.1.8: wind-pipe; 367.4.13: “was” not in original; 367.5.1: “disappointe” (ends at extreme right edge of page); 367.17.9: swash-buckler; 367.20.10: bravoes; 367.20.13–21.1: the Duc d’Alencon; 367.26.14: bravoes; 367. 29.5: bravoes; 367.31.9: doged; 367.38.10: for ever; 367.38.13: bloodhouns; 368.7.5–6: text has been erased and retyped over, this is probable reading; 368.21.7: inn-keeper; 368.25.10: comma after “man”; 368.36.3: not; 369.2.11: La; 369.14.6: La; 369.27.1: lanthon; 369.35.3: subtle; 370.2.4: Speaks; 370.11.12: villians; 370.14.13: “unconsciou” ends one line, next begins “-ly”; 370.25.7: every one; 370.33.9–11: text has been erased and retyped over, this is probable reading; 370.34.12–14: the Duc d’Alencon; 371.5.6: colon rather than comma after “him”; 371.9.11: semicolon rather than comma after “saddle”; 371.23.11: La; 371.38.1: bravoes; 371.41.5: comma after “roadside”; 372.1.13: “crouche” typed to extreme right edge of page; 372.9.12: second draft ends at this point, from here text follows first draft; 372.22.12: can not; 372.31.7–9: “The Resolute Friend”; 375.10.10: new comers; 375.17.5–7: “The Resolute Friend”; 375.22.6: dies; 375.24.12–25.1: “The Resolute Friend”; 375.26.13: can not; 375.27.2: comma after “rank”; 375.30.3: T’is; 375.36.4: some one; 376.5.5: Tis; 376.31.7: semicolon rather than comma after “answered”; 376.34.4: brake; 377.9.9–10.1: “as if reminded of her mission” is added by typing above the line, with no indication of insertion point; 378.40.12: no comma after “de Valence”; 379.5.10: no comma after “moonlight”; 379.10.9: comma rather than semicolon after “Agnes”; 379.28.6: re-charging; 379.33.11: Hawks; 380.5.6: comma after “moan”; 380.38.1: inn keeper; 381.10.14: comma rather than dash after “bow”; 381.13.7: comma after “in”; 381.13.13: can not; 381.20.5: sea-ward; 381.23.10–24.1: “and Francoise with them” is added by typing above the line, no indicated insertion point; 381.32.2–4: “The Resolute Friend” (in single rather than double quotation marks); 382.2.6: “the” not in original; 382.4.3: can not; 382.6.6–8: “The Resolute

Friend” (in single rather than double quotation marks); 382.15.6–8: “The Resolute Friend” (in single rather than double quotation marks); 382.18.10: can not; 383.15.13: oar-locks; 383.36.8: mêlée; 384.10.6: “a” not in original; 384.24.10: no comma after “desperation”; 384.40.2: lord Duke of Bourbon

The Shadow of the Vulture

Text taken from *The Magic Carpet Magazine,* January 1934. 389.14.5: the; 390.4.13: comma after “departed”; 390.34.8: mêlée; 393.4.3: simitar; 394.16.10: comma after “it”; 396.26.13: some one; 397.18.4: no comma after “dark”; 397.35.8: comma after “supplies”; 398.16.3: say; 398.30.6: digged; 398.37.7: comma after “women”; 400.3.4: no comma after “square”; 401.10.2: simitars; 401.24.7: a; 402.7.1: no comma after “colorful”; 402.17.10: no comma after “it”; 404.1.10: no comma after “snarling”; 404.16.2: simitars; 404.19.5: some one; 404.32.3: simitar; 405.37.11: comma after “mines”; 405.38.1: no comma after “accordingly”; 406.7.5: some one; 406.37.7: Am-Hof; 409.12.6: some one; 411.36.8: simitars; 412.8.6: no comma after “narrow”; 412.12.13: some one; 412.13.4: some one; 413.16.1: simitar; 413.21.9: simitar; 413.25.1: some one; 417.15.7: she; 420.6.6: then; 420.23.8: Cæsars; 420.27.3: fête

The Road of the Eagles

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, a copy of which was provided by the Cross Plains Public Library. There are numerous editorial pencilings on the typescript; these have been disregarded in the preparation of this text. 424.41.10: shore-line; 425.2.9: water-line; 425.10.1: counter-part; 425.22.4: shore-line; 425.23.12: headlong (“o” and “g” have lines penciled through them and “a” and “d” penciled above, but the hand appears to be the same that made other editorial markings, not Howard’s); 425.30.13: comma after “Cossacks”; 426.32.10: was running; 427.23.7: “zhukk!” not underlined (i.e., not italicized); 428.2.3: beards; 428.11.9: buzzard’s; 428.16.2: corspe; 428.20.6: comma after “this”; 430.16.4: prince; 431.1.1: sentance; 431.21.3: comma after “craft”; 431.30.11: “of” not in original; 431.36.5: comma after “comment”; 431.40.4: disastrious; 432.1.7: prince; 432.4.7: Alexandria; 432.6.8: prince; 432.15.11: setting; 432.23.5:

ardour; 432.29.9: independant; 435.1.8: “a” not in original; 436.7.4: period rather than comma after “least”; 436.18.6: comma after “creek”; 436.38.1: suddeness; 437.16.6: no comma after “Ekrem”; 439.23.4: Well-led; 439.38.5: portentiously; 440.11.6: nitch; 440.35.8: hyphen rather than comma after “Ayesha”; 441.7.1: prince; 441.15.12: proft; 442.3.14: “how” not in original; 443.40.13: nitched; 444.18.4: comma after “wall”; 444.40.16: “it” not in original; 446.34.12: “and” not in original; 447.28.4: ecstacy; 447.32.14: for ever; 447.39.2: warriors; 447.41.2: invulunerable; 448.1.14: that; 448.34.5: agiley; 449.21.1: court yard; 450.32.11: no comma after “Instantly”; 450.32.12: comma after “as”; 451.8.6: on; 452.2.12: for ever; 452.4.12: prince; 452.5.10: “the” not in original; 452.25.2: devined; 452.33.2: prince; 453.8.2: prince; 453.31.3: no hyphen; 453.35.13: new-comers; 453.38.4: prince; 455.32.11: T’is; 456.3.12: Phillip’s

Untitled Fragment (The Track of Bohemund)

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Synopsis (The Slave-Princess)

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Fragment (The Slave-Princess)

Text taken from Howard’s original typescript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Fragment (“He knew de Bracy …”)

Text taken from Howard’s original manuscript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Fragment (“The wind from the Mediterranean …”)

Text taken from *Amra,* November 1959. No changes have been made for this edition.

Recap of Harold Lamb's "The Wolf Chaser"

Text taken from *Lord of Samarcand and Other Adventure Tales of the Old Orient,* 2005. No changes have been made for this edition.

Untitled Fragment ("The Persians had all fled …")

Text taken from Howard's original typescript, a copy of which was provided by Glenn Lord. No changes have been made for this edition.

The Sign of the Sickle

Text taken from *A Rhyme of Salem Town and Other Poems* (Robert E. Howard Properties, LLC, 2002). No changes have been made for this edition.

Mistress of Death

Text taken from Howard's original typescripts, copies of which were provided by Glenn Lord. There are two drafts of this story. One consists of seven pages, apparently a first draft, in which the final paragraphs seem to be a synopsis of the story's conclusion. The other draft, apparently a second, consists of ten pages, and ends just as Agnes and John Stuart are setting off for the house of Françoise de Bretagny. We have followed the second draft until it ends (at 511.29.2), using the first draft for the remainder of the text.

The first artists who grabbed my imagination worked in the comics field. They were John Buscema, Alfredo Alcala, and Nestor Redondo. On the classical side, there were Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo.

Later, in my twenties and thirties, I came to love the works of Sir Frank Brangwyn, William Waterhouse, and Solomon J. Solomon. These artists were masters of composing the sensual and dramatic. I also came to appreciate the Golden Age illustrators of America, like Charles Dana Gibson, Alex Raymond, Dean Cornwell, Mead Schaeffer, etc. These artists collectively inspired me to pave a way for my own creative vision.

John Watkiss

Our thanks to Marcelo, Rusty, Stuart, Jack and Barbara, Gary, Mark, Greg M., Greg S., Tim, John, Ed, Michael, Jay, Thommy, Fred, Kaitlin, Keith, and David. It’s been a privilege to work with each of you.

Jim & Ruth Keegan

Thanks to the extraordinary vision and leadership of Marcelo Anciano, and the dedicated efforts of a number of exceptionally talented people, I think we’ve produced a series of books that Robert E. Howard could be proud of. I have benefited enormously from the efforts of Rob Roehm and David Gentzel, and the sage advice and assistance of Paul Herman and Patrice Louinet, throughout this series. The editorial and production team at Del Rey Books has been a complete joy to work with, exceptionally good at their business and profoundly patient with my shortcomings. Jim and Ruth Keegan have provided marvelous design and artistic direction. None of this would have been possible without Glenn Lord, the greatest champion that a writer could have hoped for, and a finer friend than I have ever deserved. And speaking of things I don’t deserve, the love and understanding of my wife, Shelly, has carried me through.

Rusty Burke

All good things must come to an end and I’d like to thank everyone I’ve worked with on this Robert E. Howard series; all the talented artists – a long-time Watkiss fan, I can’t wait to see what John’s done for this book; mainstays Rusty, Patrice and Jim and Ruth, Jay at Paradox and last, but not least Marcelo Anciano, for getting me involved way back when.

Stuart Williams

"[Behind Howard's stories] lurks a dark poetry and the timeless truth of dreams."
—ROBERT BLOCH

ROBERT E. HOWARD

SWORD WOMAN

AND OTHER HISTORICAL ADVENTURES

FULLY ILLUSTRATED BY JOHN WATKISS

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